

CULTIVATING A CIVIC IDENTITY USING A FEMINIST COHORT MODEL: AN ANALYSIS OF TULANE'S NEWCOMB SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Aidan Smith, Ryan McBride, Anna Mahoney and Agnieszka Nance

Abstract

Analysis of the Newcomb Scholars Program at Tulane University offers a case study in the development of civic identity through participation in a four-year curricular program with community engagement and service-learning grounded in feminist pedagogies and theories.^{1,2} Each year, 20 intellectually curious and ambitious undergraduates are selected to participate in an academically rigorous, interdisciplinary learning experience centering feminist leadership. Using data from a recently completed 10-year evaluation of the Newcomb Scholars Program, this article considers how these students' civic identity is forged because of curricular and co-curricular experiences and persists in post-graduation settings. Evaluation data includes longitudinal survey responses, participant grade data, and demographic information of program participants. Our analysis examines how the components of the Scholars Program adhere to the five building blocks for developing a healthy civic identity and shares results from the program's 10-year assessment (Schnaubelt et al., 2022). Special focus is placed on participants' commitment to feminism as a political issue, a defining element of a healthy civic identity. Significantly, the study found nearly 77% of respondents of the alumnae survey agreed that they are currently engaged in some level of feminist work, and 95% of respondents identified as a feminist. The cohort structure is also a focus. It keeps the Newcomb Scholars together for curricular and co-curricular experiences across 4 years, allowing them to practice the building blocks of a healthy civic identity in the context of an enduring community. Further, we discuss the challenges the program has experienced due to institutional and organizational constraints. Finally, we offer thoughts on how to address these concerns within a context of national democratic threat and decreased trust in higher education.

1. The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

2. This article relies on the Newcomb Scholars Assessment Report 2021, which included significant contributions and data analysis by research assistant Kelsey Williams.

University missions abound with statements about good citizenship and preparing students for civic life. Tulane University's mission is "to create, communicate, and conserve knowledge in order to enrich the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities to think, to learn and to act, and lead with integrity and wisdom." What is a healthy civic life besides communities acting with integrity and wisdom? Tulane explicitly embraces its civic objective in another way when, as the mission statement continues, it says the university pursues its mission "by fostering community-building initiatives." (Tulane University Mission Statement). This distinctive priority is catalyzed by the university's specific location in a multicultural, racially diverse city vulnerable to natural disasters — and whose history includes the largest slave market in the United States, one of the most expensive natural disasters in U.S. history, and a longstanding, substantial mutual aid infrastructure (Parr, 2016; Tansey, 1982). The imperative for Tulane to nurture students' civic identity within a community is both vital to its legitimacy as an institution of higher learning and community member, while also being an incredible challenge. In the last decade, many scholars (e.g., Saltmarsh et al., 2017) have pointed out the struggle of institutions to transform and to cultivate creative future leaders who can sustain and advance democracy, even in the face of political division and backsliding.

One way to think about the "building blocks" of a civic identity is to compare them to what Aristotle views as intellectual virtues, the skills or intellectual understandings which can be taught straightforwardly in conventional college courses. Other elements of a civic identity, which, according to the Working Paper, are "core commitments," are roughly equivalent to what Aristotle views as moral virtues. In fact, the Working Paper refers to a core commitment to integrity, which is clearly a moral virtue. Such "core commitments" cannot be taught in the straightforward way the "building blocks" (or intellectual virtues) can. Instead, they are developed through more wide-ranging experiences and practices over longer periods. They require actions in the world, especially within complex social communities. Ideally, intellectual virtues are imparted in ways that reflect rather than contradict the moral virtues. For example, while imparting substantive historical information about feminist movements, Newcomb Scholars uses feminist pedagogical methods that shape the mindsets of students. In this way, the development of a commitment to a political cause, like feminism, can be curated to some extent, and tools for reflection on the experiences can be offered and encouraged — but the experiences are larger than any university course or particular set of skills and knowledge. The resulting habits of action, reasoning, and feeling eventually somehow lodge themselves in us as part of our character (Aristotle, 2012).

The Newcomb Scholars curricular program is grounded in established feminist pedagogical methods that seek an egalitarian learning climate. In 1978, Black feminist philosopher Audre Lorde encouraged us to understand that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Broadly understood, this simple framing asks feminist practitioners to appreciate that white heteropatriarchy cannot be subverted using traditional methodologies and metrics. Thus, feminist pedagogy deploys new tools to produce a different, more equitable world. Webb et al. (2002) articulate the six principles of feminist pedagogy: "reformation of the relationship between professor and student, empowerment, building community, privileging voice, respecting the diversity of personal experience, and challenging traditional notions." Light, Nicholas, and Bondy (2015) affirm this

framework, arguing that a feminist classroom offers the opportunity for a multiplicity of perspectives, where students and instructors learn equally from one another, with no perspective necessarily more valuable than another. These principles form the framework of the program’s curricular approach, and instructors’ methods may vary but are generally non-hierarchical and center on various ways of knowing and speaking, with multiple opportunities for the expression of expertise. Within the Newcomb Scholars classroom, there is not necessarily a “right” answer. Feminist pedagogy interrogates power, including the policies and politics of the classroom, striving to give all participants in the learning community a voice. Instead of the “sage on the stage” model of lecturing, students collaborate with one another to shift the locus of communication and knowledge production away from the approach where an assumed giver of knowledge speaks to the assumed consumer of that knowledge. Grades are not punitive, and assignments are not critical deliverables that create a zero-sum game, where students compete against one another. Revision is encouraged, with a goal towards improved skill development, not just rote assessment. These methods offer a shift away from the regimented instructional methods often found in undergraduate classrooms, and instead lend themselves to the development of an intellectual cohort. When each person is vested with an equally powerful voice and is encouraged to take up space in a classroom setting, it becomes easier for students to see themselves as civic actors with something to contribute to their community.

Civic identity is more than just skills and knowledge; one of the salient features of civic identity is that it is, as Lee Knepfkamp describes it, “holistic.” That is, civic identity is bound up with our emotional, intellectual, and even our spiritual being. We develop civic identities not just as intellectuals or as academics, but as whole persons. The Working Paper describes four particular commitments at the core of one’s civic identity, a commitment to the “values, practices, and institutions of liberal democracy;” a “focused commitment to an issue;” a “commitment to integrity;” and a “communitarian mindset.” These commitments are as much habits of thinking and acting as they are conceptual frameworks. Teaching them involves being part of a community and doing civic work in addition to having academic discussions. Feminist pedagogy calls this combination of theory and action praxis (Coffey & Delamont, 2002).

With these concepts of civic identity and feminist pedagogy, we offer an analysis of the Newcomb Scholars Program at the Newcomb Institute at Tulane. We are interested in the lasting impact on civic identity developed through participation in a four-year cohort experience with curricular, co-curricular, and community-engaged dimensions. We will examine a longitudinal study of a decade of participants in the Newcomb Scholars Program, as well as other data on the program. We will offer insights into the ways the various elements of the framework are deeply interconnected and help us to better understand the ways participants’ civic identities have been cultivated as a result of the program objectives and structures.

Tulane’s Center for Public Service and Newcomb Scholars Programs

In 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the university embarked on a shift to a more civically-minded curriculum. Tulane’s Renewal Plan of 2006 recognized that the university and the city of New Orleans are

interdependent, allocating significant resources to create the Center for Public Service and re-envisioning their approach to feminist leadership by redesigning the previous women's coordinate institution, Newcomb College.

Tulane now dedicates substantial resources to civic and community engagement, with the goal of having students and faculty collaborate with community partners to address pressing societal problems. With campuses in uptown and downtown New Orleans, one of the most diverse and culturally rich cities in the United States, Tulane has around 10,000 undergraduate students, who hail mainly from outside of New Orleans and Louisiana. The predominantly white institution has also launched efforts to encourage reflection on the privilege of its affiliates and to stay committed to the values of democracy, and to focus on and address social justice issues — all in the spirit of deliberative dialogue, and for the development of democratic habits and skills, and the learning of social change framework and theory. Since the 2006 Renewal Plan, all undergraduates participate twice in some type of academic experiential learning involving community partners to meet core curriculum graduation requirements. Potential outcomes of these academic courses and programs range from reciprocal partnerships, empathy, leadership skills, critical thinking skills, enhanced knowledge, intercultural development enhancement, etc. But there is not a strong focus on how to weave these community-engaged experiences into a larger context of democracy and the role of the university in public policy or political engagement. A 2023 unpublished internal survey of partner agencies completed by CPS confirms the overall belief that these activities focus more on the support of specific local communities, rather than on the contribution to the understanding of civic obligations and the development of these students' civic identity.

The Newcomb Scholars Program was designed at the same time as the Center for Public Service and has roots going much further back. Tulane established Newcomb College as a women's college in 1886 and held sex-segregated courses until the mid-1960s, when all undergraduate students began taking courses together, as norms around coeducation changed. In 1987, the faculties and departments at Newcomb College and the College of Arts and Sciences at Tulane merged (though their degree-granting purviews did not — with Newcomb still granting degrees to women graduating in the arts and sciences until 2006) (Tucker & Willinger, 2012). In July 2006, Newcomb-Tulane College emerged as the combined degree-granting institution for all undergraduate students, and the board established the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College Institute, designed to be:

an academic center that draws women students and all faculties from across the university in a dynamic, interdisciplinary program designed to enhance women's education at the university and that also carries forward proudly the legacy and spirit of Newcomb College and the strong and vibrant Newcomb community (Tulane University, 2006b).

To fulfill the charge of developing a formal program or course of study an interdisciplinary faculty committee convened to conceptualize the Newcomb Scholars Program. The program was meant to strengthen a commitment to feminism and develop an identification with the legacy of the historic women's college. The 2009 mission document, outlining the program's original goals and objectives, can be found in Appendix A. In short, it describes a program which:

will have an academically enriching and shared 4-year experience through seminars, experiential learning opportunities, research, and engagement in leadership and service initiatives. The Program will also create a community for these Newcomb Scholars where women students will be connected with one another and with other women in the community at large.

After an application and interview process with input from Newcomb faculty, a faculty selection committee accepts a cohort of about 20 students each year. In its first 10 years, it was exclusively open to female-identifying students. The 4-year Newcomb Scholars Program includes conventional and community-engaged coursework that offers deep content study, knowledge of tools and frameworks for social change, and democratic habits, knowledge, and skills. As such it provides a solid foundation, or what the Working Paper calls “building blocks,” of a civic identity. At the same time, participants in the Newcomb Scholars Program are part of a cohort, a community that stays together and learns and grows together, not just for the duration of a single class, but for all 4 years of college through curricular and co-curricular activities. This length of this experience together gives participants opportunities to practice civic engagement while working within a community. Their relationships gain depth, and they invest more of themselves in their work. Over time, they can gradually develop the kinds of commitments and communitarian mindset that constitute a civic identity in the “Working Paper.”

All this is made possible due to a financial circumstance created by the closure of Newcomb College in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Funds that had been allocated toward administrative costs were redirected toward the Newcomb Scholars Program, and future fundraising efforts centered this program in their communications materials. Significant resources allow a great latitude for spending, and provide money for travel, research, and cohort building programs. The opportunity to create this program should not erase the objection from alumnae who protested the reorganization of the College. In fact, the Newcomb Institute and Newcomb Scholars emerged from a court battle waged by women engaging the political system to prevent the dissolution of the College. These civically engaged women are the Newcomb Scholars’ predecessors.

The Building Blocks Embedded with Newcomb Scholars

Engaging in public life, especially in the United States, is not easy. Transparency in government, access to information about processes, and the rules for who is allowed to participate all vary across localities. As such, training undergraduates to become engaged citizens requires an acknowledgement of the costs of participation, in addition to skill development. Students need to be taught not only the rules of the game, but also how to troubleshoot along the way. They need strategies to begin participation, which can develop into habits, ensuring a lifelong commitment to their communities. Soft skills such as “anticipating, planning for, and working through obstacles” enable students to translate their political interest and motivation into civic action (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020, pp. 38). As such, undergraduate programs that help develop these skills enable students to enact their civic identity.

Several aspects of the Newcomb Scholars Program impart these skills both implicitly and explicitly. First, to enter the program, students must fulfill a lengthy application process, which requires that students adhere to deadlines, complete paperwork, and participate in an interview process. Once in the program, students are instructed about the cohort design of the program, requiring students to commit to their community. Students are frequently reminded of this commitment throughout their 4 years, emphasizing that the success of the program requires their engagement with each other as well as academic work. This emphasis on community reinforces the principles of a larger civic identity. The curriculum of the program also includes content knowledge of the history of higher education, including structural inequities allowed by law, as well as liberation movements that re-envisioned educational access in the United States (Table 1).

In the first year of the course, students learn how social movements were able to shape the country's history, particularly around racial and gender injustice. By learning about how previous generations engaged and were successful (and how they dealt with failure, setbacks, and backlash) in shaping public life, Newcomb Scholars develop the knowledge and skills to civically engage. This course deploys the particularly feminist pedagogical tool of archival research, as students both literally and figuratively retrieve the stories of those civic actors neglected in typical textbooks and histories (Reinharz, 1992). In the second year of the course specifically, Newcomb Scholars learn through the case study method, which by design, prompts them to engage in leadership challenges with no right answers. This pedagogical method again presents students with historical narratives that teach them content knowledge about civil rights, legal discrimination, and reforms, while asking them to place themselves in the shoes of decision makers. Scholarship has shown this method of teaching can be useful as a feminist methodology when featuring women as leaders, particularly those that center on public policy outcomes (Kenney, 2004).

This course allows students to engage in classroom debate as to how they would manage the various challenges facing a committee staffer during the Clarence Thomas hearings, an NAACP executive director bringing the organization back from scandal, or an accountant discriminated against in a failed promotion attempt. The process requires that students anticipate, plan for, and work through obstacles in these real-life examples as scholars of youth engagement recommend. The culminating project for this class is a case study of their own, making students not only knowledge producers, but also teachers, as these case studies can be selected as future course materials.

Table 1
2023 Required and elective courses³

INTU 1000: The History and Philosophy of Women in Higher Education	Spring Semester, First-Year	Required	3 credits
INTU 2000: Case Studies on Women and Leadership	Spring Semester, Sophomore Year	Required	3 credits
INTU 3000: Feminist Epistemologies and Research Design	Spring Semester, Junior Year	Required	3 credits
INTU 4000: Newcomb Research Seminar	Fall Semester, Senior Year	Required	1 credit
INTU 2500: Digital Scholarship	May participate after first year	Elective	1 credit

3. The original curriculum consisted of INTU 1000: The History and Philosophy of Women in Higher Education, INTU 2000: Feminist Epistemologies and Research Design, INTU 3000: Case Studies on Women and Leadership, and INTU 4000: Newcomb Research Seminar reflecting a different order of courses and without the newly included elective course.

Scholars themselves contribute to the development of classroom materials for future scholars, reinforcing the idea that learning need not be hierarchical and that students can learn from one another as well as from faculty.

The seminar in third year focuses on feminist research methods, with an emphasis on the development of individual literature reviews. Students refine their analytical skills through close reading and co-leading discussions, which positions them as the authority on a given subject. This leadership role strengthens engagement with the content and fosters a sense of responsibility for their peers' own feminist education. Arguably, this assumption of the role of educator reinforces notions of feminism as a non-hierarchical framework in which all voices have merit.

While the fourth year course offers a similar seminar experience to other upper-class courses supporting the development of a senior thesis, the Scholars Program offers co-curricular engagements that allow students to have bonding experiences and build relationships outside of the classroom. Writing retreats are offered on Friday afternoons, offering support for those students that need the dedicated space and time to work. Seniors take a weekend-long writing retreat to a nearby beach resort town each January to finalize their senior theses and independent study projects. While not an idyllic vacation, the offseason timing allows students access to a large home, where they can work as well as relax — for some students offering their first off-campus trip with non-family members. Expenses for participation are covered with university funds, ensuring that no one is excluded if they wish to participate.

These intentional events seek to foster both persistence and resilience for individuals within a community. It would be easy for a student struggling to complete an individual research project (often with limited engagement from a faculty advisor) to quit work on an assignment not required for graduation. Yet, we have found that students turn to one another first for support, and after that, to faculty members in the program. Group chats, impromptu study breaks, and orchestrated events: students report offers of interpersonal engagement that keeps them committed to the program and to each other. Open-ended survey data revealed that this network contributed to persistence in the program, with 48% of respondents referencing this community. Two comments illustrate this trend:

Being able to rely on peer support during some of the most stressful times of college was incredibly helpful in staying motivated to complete the program.

One of the most important parts of the Scholars Program for me was the opportunity to grow — both intellectually and personally — with members of my cohort. My fellow cohort members were a constant source of support and were around to boost my confidence when I needed it, either with aspects of the program or in my academic work in general. I also valued the opportunity to learn from my fellow members. We all brought our own interests and expertise to the Newcomb Scholars projects.

Newcomb Scholars' Civic Identity and their Commitment to Feminism

There are many ways to be a feminist, and each approach needs careful analysis and critique. The Newcomb Scholars Program grounds those discussions in a critical analysis of historical movements, which allows

participants to consider how they can learn from the past and find their own ways to participate in something larger. Our analysis of the program and the extent to which it has accomplished its mission is based on an a 10-year study that includes an alumnae survey from December 2019 to January 2020. The survey included 34 questions, including primarily Likert Scale questions, with a few “Check All That Apply,” short answer, and demographic questions. It was administered anonymously on Qualtrics, a software frequently used in higher education settings. Efforts to keep both survey results and respondent names anonymous encouraged alumnae to give honest and critical feedback with the assurance that their response (or lack thereof) would not affect relationships with faculty, staff, or other alumnae of the program. Single-use, personal links sent to potential participants eliminated duplicate responses.

With a total of 136 surveys distributed to the most recently verified personal or work emails of all students who began the Scholars Program, with the exception of two emails that bounced, one “do not contact” request, and one alumna who passed away; $N = 81$ alumnae responded, a rate of 60%. Methods for analyzing the entry/exit and alumnae surveys were based on the format of the questions. Likert-scale, “check all that apply,” ranking, and demographic questions were analyzed and visualized through SPSS, Qualtrics, and Excel, including response frequencies, cross-tabulations, ANOVAs, and statistical significance tests. Open-ended survey questions deployed a qualitative open-ended response coding method. This was an iterative process of identifying response themes and calculating the frequency responses of the themes that arise to determine response trends. Key themes that emerged after multiple reviews of the open-ended responses reflected that participants valued their engagement with one another as a crucial component to their participation and participation within the program, specifically:

- Support
- Looked up to/inspired by/admire
- Bonds
- Motivated
- Friends
- Solidarity
- Commiseration through hard parts
- Inspired
- Cohort community
- Obligation to others/not wanting to let them down/want to support others/invested in their success
- Encouragement
- No competition
- Sense of belonging
- Feminist development
- Spending time together/would miss them/looked forward to seeing
- Diverse interests/perspectives/background
- Talked to cohort members about decision (sometimes implied)

- Shared experience (“together”)
- Learning from fellow scholars
- Boosted confidence

These words and themes identified that it was not simply an investment in feminist scholarship or leadership that motivated students, but a concomitant commitment to the cohort community.

For the first 10 years, 2009–2019, the focus of this study, the Newcomb Scholars Program was sex-segregated and organized around feminist approaches without explicitly declaring itself to be a feminist program. Yet the program shaped the intellectual trajectory of participants while they were students and even after graduation. The survey revealed that most of the individual research was shaped by feminist thought, regardless of disciplinary major or individual research inquiry (Figure 1).

Further, alumnae almost universally (95%) identified as feminists (compared with just over 62% when they started the program). This percentage seems exceedingly high; perhaps those who identified with feminism were more inclined to fill out the survey in the first place. Even if the number is inflated, the commitment to feminism is clearly shared by an extremely high percentage of the alumnae.

This focused commitment to a particular issue can be interpreted as an example of what the above-mentioned “Working Paper: Core Commitments and Building Blocks of a Healthy Identity” describes as a core commitment of civic identity. That is, the “Working Paper” holds that embracing an issue the way Newcomb Scholar alumnae have embraced feminism is part of the requirements of a healthy civic identity.

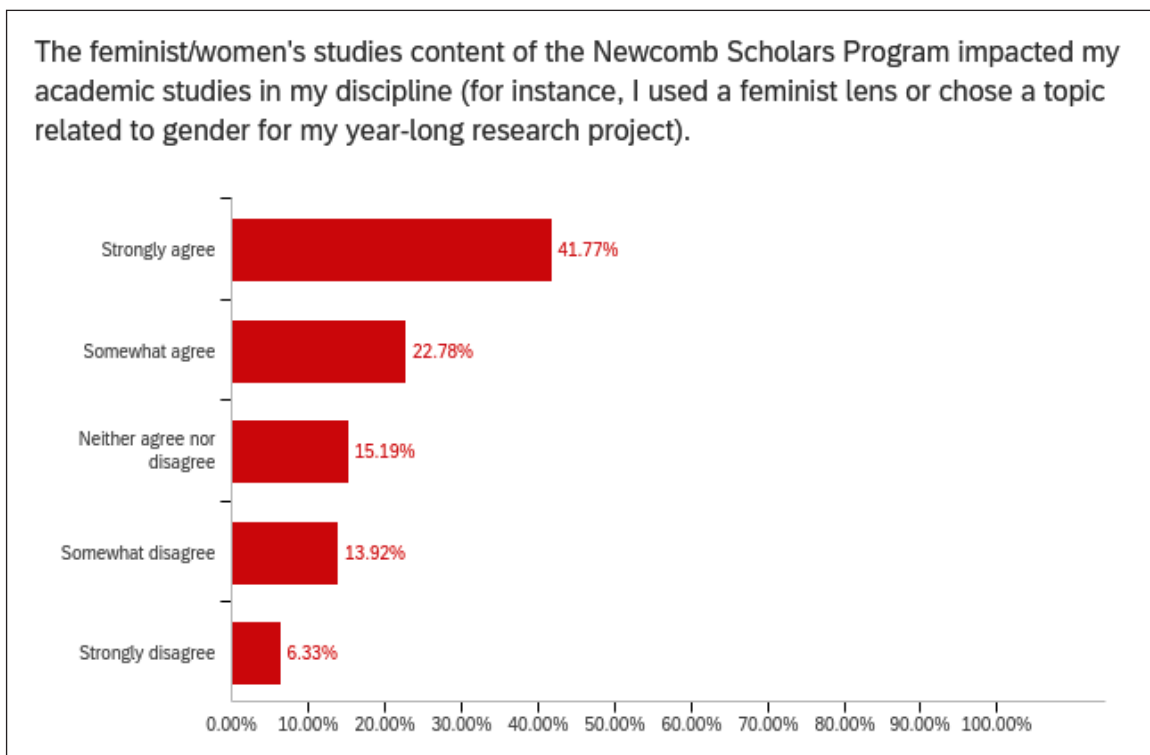


Figure 1 Impact of the Content on Academic Studies.

Alumnae not only identify as feminists; a remarkable 77% of those who responded to the survey say they are involved in some kind of feminist work even beyond graduation. Again, this number could be inflated by the fact that those who are devoted to feminism and supporting feminist works may have been more likely to respond to the survey. Moreover, the wording of the question does not tell us how modest or extensive their work is. But even if the actual number is lower, a sizable percentage of alumnae are certainly actively supporting feminist causes in some capacity.

Their commitment to feminism and feminist causes as alumnae is in line with their use of feminism to think about their other studies as undergraduates. Around 65% of survey respondents strongly or somewhat agreed to the Alumnae Survey statement: “The feminist and gender studies content of the Newcomb Scholars Program impacted my academic studies in my discipline (for instance, I used a feminist lens or chose a topic related to gender for my year-long research project).” The program is interdisciplinary, drawing students with majors from across the university’s six undergraduate colleges (Table 2), arguably making the persistence of feminist identity more compelling. And while some may have reinforced program content in their chosen majors, others certainly did not.

Newcomb Scholars’ Civic Identity and their Communitarian Mindset

Newcomb Scholar alumnae report that the aspect of the program that had the greatest impact on them was the interpersonal connections they had with members of their cohort and other Newcomb Scholars cohorts. More than half of the 75 respondents placed these interpersonal connections as the most important or second most important when considering the nine aspects of the program in terms of personal impact — as important as financial resources, and more than publication opportunities, and connections with faculty and staff. Of the respondents, 45% said they found their best friends through the Newcomb Scholars Program. And anecdotally, students often became roommates with one another, which further deepens the sense of community. Significantly, 60% of alumnae respondents said they still feel close to people in their cohort.

Table 2
*Newcomb Scholars Alumnae Major Counts and Frequencies**

Major	# of Students	Percentage
Liberal Arts	83	78%
Science and Engineering	43	41%
Public Health	14	13%
Business	5	5%
Architecture	0	0.00%
Continuing Studies	1	1%

*Note: The total count of majors adds up to a higher number than the total number of Newcomb Scholars because many students had multiple majors.

By offering a cohort experience, including elements of community engagement in the curriculum, and by embracing a critical feminist lens and feminist pedagogical approaches,⁴ the Scholars Program works to affirm the notion that “we are all in this together,” supporting students in their development of a more communitarian mindset; something the “Working Paper” describes as the fourth kind of core commitment (Beachboard, 2011). This communitarian mindset is aligned with the feminist nature of the program, which presupposes a commitment to equality, student-centered learning, and concern for the whole person that goes beyond the superficial.

For example, in the third-year course, students participate in a social annotations assignment that recognizes students as co-producers of knowledge. The assignment asks students to demonstrate that they “carefully and critically considered the text by making connections to the course themes, identifying arguments, analyzing cited sources, and referring to other texts”; and to “insert new ideas for discussion, respond to others’ ideas, pose questions, highlight and expound upon interesting passages, explain a tricky concept, offer an informed opinion, and bring in additional resources.” They were required to post at least 5–7 annotations per reading, using a combination of initial posts and responses to peers, and to read all the annotations before our synchronous class session. The result is that “students practice a democratic, cooperative interrogation of knowledge that, while not without its own unique challenges, demonstrates a more just and collective way of producing and circulating knowledge” (Daniel forthcoming).

The cohort experience also enables discussions among Newcomb Scholars that are democratic, embracing a multitude of perspectives along with the tensions that come with them. Such tensions are often uncomfortable, and practice is needed to develop the view that tensions are healthy and even indicators of genuine dialogue. Just as importantly, the program builds a community where individuals are valued. Talking within a community often allows more openness and honesty because of the depth of those relationships and a recognition that they differ in many ways, but still respect and feel a bond with one another. For example, in the third-year course, students read work highlighting how and why researchers should consider their own positionalities in relation to their research subjects, and then students are asked to complete a “Biases and Positionality” brainstorm activity, where they think through these issues in regard to their own research projects, which often involve engaging across difference (Daniel, 2022).

An example of the way a community allows for depth of conversation and a diversity of views can be seen in the graduating cohort of 2021, which included the president of the Planned Parenthood student organization, as well as the president of the Feminists for Life group, an anti-abortion organization.

Such ideological diversity is fostered by a second-year course structured around case studies, a pedagogical method that “emphasizes individualism, the power of reason, the value of argument, the importance of self-expression, and the appropriateness of skepticism toward authority and expertise.... [T]he case method is appropriate whenever a teacher or trainer wishes to place emphasis on stimulating new ideas, encouraging creativity and independence of thought, encouraging people to assume leadership roles, and encouraging willingness to

4. See Weiler, 1991; Webb, 2002; Crabtree et al., 2009.

take risks and assume personal responsibility for achieving results” (Lynn, 1999). Students running cases inhabit the characters of the case, frequently jumping from one persona to another, to see problems without clear solutions from various perspectives. Frequently, students’ own points of view on the case changes from reading it individually to after class discussions, as assessed in case reflection assignments.

Such ideological diversity and experiences with difficult discussions within a community of scholars also serves to deepen and enrich the service learning and community engagement that are offered by the Newcomb Scholars Program. Concrete work with community complicates and grounds their regular discussions of political theory. The context allows them to allow their service to help them to reflect on their beliefs and the institutions they inhabit. Every student at Tulane engages in some community-engaged service activities. But students in the Newcomb Scholars Program are not just taking service-learning courses or doing service internships; they are engaged in activities that they will discuss and reflect upon with other Newcomb Scholars over their years together. All these elements, over the course of a Newcomb Scholar’s participation in the program, offer students the opportunity to develop a more communitarian mindset.

Contemporary Challenges

A major change to the program came during the 2019–2020 school year in the wake of an investigation from the Office of Civil Rights, alleging discrimination against men. The resulting resolution agreement opened Newcomb Programs to all students who share a commitment to gender equity, irrespective of sex. Shifting away from its original tagline, “Educating undergraduate women for leadership in the 21st century,” Newcomb Institute adopted a new mission: “Educating undergraduates to achieve gender equity.” During the 2019 application cycle, while no men applied, the Newcomb Scholars accepted the first self-identified nonbinary scholar into the program. At the time of this writing, no self-identified cisgender men have applied. However, there are currently several non-binary students who are engaged in the program that we know of, with these numbers fluctuating often without disclosure from students.

As the university attempts to reckon with a lack of diversity among its students, staff, and faculty, so too does the Newcomb Scholars Program. The selection committee has intentionally sought to recruit cohort members from a variety of backgrounds, with a particular emphasis on racial, geographic, and economic status. As a result, the Newcomb Scholar cohorts are over-representative of the racial demographics of the larger student body. For instance, 58% of the students in the most recent class of 2026 identify as people of color, compared to approximately 28% of all undergraduate students at the university. At different points in the tenure of the program, we have struggled to retain some students of color who have expressed isolation and social challenges consistent with attendance at primarily white institutions. We are collaborating with colleagues focused on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives to create community and ease the experiences of these students. Another challenge is that only have one faculty of color who teaches in the program, and students may not directly engage with her until their final year in the program. We have brought in women of color (WOC) guest speakers to address this lack of representation, yet this is not as effective as in-house instructors. Further, we are reluctant to ask more of

our WOC colleagues already affiliated with the university, given they are already more likely to bear a disproportionate service and mentorship burden.

An intentional, intersectional feminist community will constantly be assessing itself and thinking on what adjustments are needed to continue meeting students' learning objectives. Changes have been made to the program because of the 10-year assessment. For instance, to be intentionally anti-racist in our approach, the first-year seminar was recently revised through Tulane's Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching's Inclusive and Equitable Course (Re)Design Institute to expand its collaborative approach and incorporate different technological offerings. The seminar's primary source course materials now include increased engagement with multimedia products created by people of color, such as podcasts and social media accounts. The seminar also eliminated hard deadlines and punitive absentee policies, moving away from hierarchical structures that are also in keeping with the commitment to feminist pedagogical values previously discussed.

Limitations and Concluding Thoughts

Two of the core commitments of a healthy civic identity according to the "Working Paper," are devotion to an issue and developing a communitarian mindset. These two core commitments are evident in a remarkable percentage of alumnae of the Newcomb Scholars Program. Such commitments are significant, because according to the "Working Paper," core commitments are not easily changed. The building blocks of civic identity, in contrast, can be taught in a more straightforward manner. And in fact, much of the focus of the Newcomb Scholars Program is focused on what the "Working Paper" describes as the five building blocks of civic identity.

More studies could help us to isolate which elements of the Newcomb Scholars Program are most effective for the development of a healthy civic identity. It is also difficult to know exactly how much the program is responsible for and how much the survey results are the result of alumnae self-selection. That is, we do not have a control group. It may be that the participants' existing interest in feminism and collaboration with a cohort led them to apply for the program in the first place. It may also be that those alumnae who are particularly devoted to feminist causes were more likely to respond to the survey. Long term, returning to our alumnae for future assessment might suggest longitudinal evidence of the long-lasting impact of the program. We understand that some students in the cohort already had the beginnings of a civic identity, and the survey results may also be somewhat inflated by those who chose to fill out the surveys. Still, it seems evident that participating in a 4-year undergraduate cohort experience built around a commitment to a vision of a more just world, viewed in this case from a feminist perspective, is an effective way to not only develop the skills needed for a healthy civic identity but also to deepen their commitment to feminism and to practice inhabiting a communitarian mindset.

Being a part of an intentional community emerges as a key theme from the assessment of the Newcomb Scholars Program, suggesting that this cohort design is critical to maintain the development of a civic identity over time and in particular, in difficult times — whether that be an individual crisis at the student level or in the broader sense, when feminist gains are under attack within certain segments of society. Developing an obligation

to others within community is a vital component of democracy when one's candidates sometimes lose, or one's policy does not get adopted. Identifying as a part of a community is what keeps individuals committed to the overall principles when the minutiae of the day to day is not always in their favor.

The recent *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* Supreme Court decision has brought national attention to human rights and the role of feminism with civil society. The Newcomb Scholars Program received the largest number of applications ever in our 2022 recruitment cycle, suggesting that students are motivated to be a part of this dialogue. Training citizens to advocate for their preferred policies within the bounds of democracy will require deep investments of financial, intellectual, and civic resources. With such contested issues at hand, an interdisciplinary program that develops critical thinking, communications, and leadership skills within a diverse community seems especially crucial.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. (2012). Book II. In R. Crisp (Ed.), *Aristotle: Nicomachean ethics, Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy* (pp. 23–36). Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511802058.006
- Beachboard, M.R., Beachboard, J.C., Li, W., & Adkison, S.R. (2011). Cohorts and relatedness: Self-determination theory as an explanation of how learning communities affect educational outcomes. *Research in Higher Education, 52*, 853–874. doi: 10.1007/s11162-011-9221-8
- Coffey, A., & Delamont, S. (2002). *Feminism and the classroom teacher: Research, praxis, pedagogy*. Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9780203486719
- Crabtree, R.D., Sapp, D.A., & Licona, A.C. (2009). Feminist pedagogy: Looking back to move forward. In Crabtree, R.D., Sapp, D.A., & Licona, A.C. (Eds.), *Feminist pedagogy: Looking back to move forward*. Johns Hopkins University Press. doi: 10.56021/9780801892769
- Daniel, C. Social annotation as feminist praxis. In *Feminist pedagogy for teaching online*. Athabasca University Press, forthcoming.
- Daniel, C. (2022). *INTU 3000: Feminist epistemologies and research design [syllabus]*. Newcomb Institute, Tulane University.
- Holbein, J., & Hillygus, D. (2020). *Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/9781108770446
- Kenney, S.J. Gender, the public policy enterprise, and case teaching. (2004). *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 23*(1), 159–178. doi: 10.1002/pam.10185
- Light, T.P., Nicholas, J., & Bondy, R. (Eds.). (2015). *Feminist pedagogy in higher education: Critical theory and practice*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Lynn, L. (1999). Welcome to the case method. Electronic Hallway, Washington.
- Parr, L.G. (2016). Sundays in the streets: the long history of benevolence, self-help, and parades in New Orleans. *Southern Cultures, 22*(4), 8–30.
- Reinharz, S., & Davidman, L. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. Oxford University Press.

- Saltmarsh, J., & Hartley, M. (2017). A brief history of the civic engagement movement in American higher education. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Service-learning and Community Engagement* (pp. 112–124).
- Schnaubelt, T., et al. (2022). Working paper: The core commitments and building blocks of a healthy civic identity: A framework for understanding student engagement and outcomes. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NCHS-IIurSjAlV8zOZxAbwr7Aop8vNMC/edit>
- Tucker, S., & Willinger, B. A. (2012). *Newcomb College, 1886–2006: higher education for women in New Orleans*. Louisiana State University Press.
- Tulane University. “Tulane University Mission Statement.” Accessed September 10, 2023. <https://tulane.edu/about/leadership-and-administration/mission-statement>.
- Tansey, R. (1982). Bernard Kendig and the New Orleans slave trade. *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 23(2), 159–178.
- Webb, L.M., Allen, M.W., & Walker, K.L. (2002). Feminist pedagogy: Identifying basic principles. *Academic Exchange*, 6(1), 67–72.
- Weiler, K. (1991). Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Educational Review*, 61(4), 449–475. doi: 10.17763/haer.61.4.a102265jl68rju84

Author Note

Please direct correspondence regarding this article to Agnieszka Nance, Center for Public Service, Tulane University, anance@tulane.edu, 504-862-3348.

Author Bios

Aidan Smith, Newcomb Institute, Tulane University

Aidan Smith is Administrative Associate Professor and Director of the Newcomb Scholars Program at the Newcomb Institute at Tulane University. She earned her bachelor’s degree at Barnard College and holds a master’s degree in mass communication from the University of Florida. She completed her doctorate in American Studies at the University of Hawaii in 2013. She studies gender and leadership with a particular focus on heteronormative gender roles and their implications for politics. She is the author of *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency* (Routledge, 2017).

Ryan McBride, Center for Public Service, Tulane University

Ryan McBride is the Andrew A.N. Pritzker Director of the Tulane Debate Society. He teaches a classical rhetoric, service-learning course called “Aristotle in New Orleans” that has his students coach middle school debate in a collaborative league he co-directs with local teachers and faculty at the Xavier University of Louisiana. He is a Senior Professor of Practice at Tulane’s Center for Public Service and Director of the Tulane Mellon Graduate

Program in Community-Engaged Scholarship, which brings together graduate students in the humanities, community leaders, and faculty for a multifaceted two-year cohort experience.

Anna Mahoney, Rockefeller Center for Public Policy, Dartmouth College

Anna Mahoney is the Executive Director of the Rockefeller Center for Public Policy at Dartmouth College. Her research interests focus on the intersection between identity and representation. She is the author of *Women Take Their Place in State Legislatures: The Creation of Women's Caucuses* (Temple University Press, 2018). She obtained a PhD in Political Science from Rutgers University, an MA in Women's Studies from the University of Alabama, and a BA in Mass Communications from Loyola University-New Orleans.

Agnieszka Nance, Center for Public Service, Tulane University

Agnieszka Nance is the Executive Director for the Center for Public Service (CPS) at Tulane. Nance received her PhD in Germanic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Before moving to the United States, she lived and studied in Warsaw and Vienna, earning a Magister degree in Germanistik. Agnieszka is a leader on Tulane's campus initiating several civic engagement programs across campus including managing the extensive service-learning curriculum for all Tulane undergraduates.

Appendix A: 2009 Newcomb Scholars Program Mission and Goals

NEWCOMB SCHOLARS

Global Thinkers, Confident Innovators, Intelligent Leaders, Experienced Investigators

According to the Tulane Renewal Plan, “The Task Force also recommends that women undergraduates who complete a program, course of study, or activity designated by a faculty committee through The Newcomb College Institute will be known as Newcomb Scholars. Participation and accomplishment in such programs of The Newcomb College Institute will be noted on the student transcript and recognized by the awarding of a certificate.”

Mission:

The Newcomb College Institute and faculty committee will oversee the implementation and execution of the Newcomb Scholars Program and provide selected undergraduate women students at Tulane with a collective intellectual experience to include theoretical knowledge and practical experience within their discipline and outside of their discipline. With the support of Newcomb Fellows, other faculty at Tulane, and alumnae and other professionals in the community, Newcomb Scholars will have an academically enriching and shared four-year experience through seminars, experiential learning opportunities, research, and engagement in leadership and service initiatives. The Program will also create a community for these Newcomb Scholars where women students will be connected with one another and with other women in the community at large.

Goals:

1. To enhance selected women students' academic experiences by creating a cohort experience through which they will conduct independent research
 - Objectives
 - Successfully complete four Newcomb Scholars seminars
 - Participation in other events and programs for individual cohort
 - Share research ideas with one's cohort and provide feedback to one another (peer review experience)

2. Through the cohort experience, Newcomb Scholars are significantly engaged in their discipline, encouraged to think theoretically and practically, as well as locally and globally, and taught to assess and evaluate information critically.
 - Objectives
 - Complete an independent research project by the Fall semester of her fourth or final year
 - Establish a mentoring relationship with faculty member(s)
 - Share research ideas with one's cohort and critique one another's work
 - Other Possible Objectives (for Goal #2)
 - Obtain grant for research or travel
 - Publish research with faculty member or independently
 - Educate campus community about her research

3. To have women students develop working relationships with Newcomb Fellows and/or other faculty, gain insight from research conducted in their discipline, and connect to a larger community of scholars outside of the Tulane community.
 - Objectives
 - Establish a research agenda with a faculty member at Tulane or other university
 - Attend a conference in her field of study
 - Present research with faculty member or independently at a conference

4. To provide women students with a community of women with whom they can network and establish collegial and professional relationships during their academic career and beyond, building and expanding the Newcomb community.
 - Objectives
 - Connect with women faculty at Tulane through Newcomb College Center for Research on Women's faculty luncheon
 - Establish networking relationships with Newcomb College alumnae in Newcomb Scholars' hometowns over the Summer
 - Participate in Newcomb Networking Nights with Newcomb College alumnae

5. To provide women students with a safe and supportive environment for them to test their knowledge and experience, build their levels of confidence, and be better prepared to face challenges and excel in their field.
 - Objectives
 - Present research agenda to cohort and faculty mentor(s)
 - Presentation of Newcomb Scholars' independent research project during Spring semester of fourth or final year
 - Admission to graduate and professional schools (and/or admission to organizations such as AmeriCorps, etc.)

6. To create and foster a close-knit community of women students who will mentor, challenge, and educate one another within their cohort and among the cohorts.
 - Objectives
 - Participation in Newcomb Scholars "families" (Scholar from each year)
 - Mentor younger Newcomb Scholars

7. To encourage women students to obtain practical experience through internships relevant to their field of study.
 - Objectives
 - Participation in Center for Public Service internship
 - Obtain internships through national organizations which offer opportunities to undergraduates (e.g. Public leadership Education Network, The White House Project, etc.)
 - Obtain internships by networking with Newcomb College alumnae
 - Obtain internships locally or nationally with company or organization

8. To encourage women students to take active leadership and service roles in the campus and larger communities.
 - Objectives
 - Development of/creation of organization
 - Create or coordinate campus or community program
 - Create a campaign of an issue relevant to research and student body or relevant to women students
 - Educate campus community or interested community members about her research