

Changing Minds

A look at the factors that make students more liberal as they move toward graduation

Mike Laskey

When Scott Hagan arrived at Notre Dame as a freshman in August 2004, he didn't stand out. The son of a plastic surgeon, Hagan graduated from the elite Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville. He was a Tennessee high school all-state lacrosse player and varsity wrestler, and his standardized test scores were outstanding. He figured he would end up at medical school after college, following in the footsteps of his father. Politically, he was a conservative Republican.

Now, as a senior, the walls of Hagan's off-campus apartment are covered with blown-up photographs of radical liberal political thinkers and philosophers, from Karl Marx to Noam Chomsky. Far removed from his days as a conservative, Hagan now calls himself a socialist. Plans for medical school are still in the works, but only after a year of volunteering in Latin America. He eventually hopes to use his medical training to advocate for universal healthcare. In three and a half years of college, the way Hagan sees the world has been flipped upside down.

While Hagan's dramatic shift of worldview is an extreme case, his story is emblematic of a statistical trend that exists at colleges everywhere, even more markedly at Notre Dame: Undergraduates' thoughts and beliefs about the world change over their four years in school, generally taking a bend to the political left.

This tendency might not be surprising at most colleges. But in some ways, Notre Dame is stereotyped as a particularly conservative institution, both because of the students it attracts and some policies it has in place. For instance, 13 percent more of 2004 Notre Dame freshmen classified themselves as conservative than the national average, according to the College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey operated out of UCLA. "That's the type of student we attract, coming out of private Catholic institutions from a lot of middle to upper-middle class families. Students do tend to be somewhat conservative when they come in," says Mel Tardy (ND '86), who is an academic advisor in the First Year of Studies program.

Some university policies are also seen as especially conservative, such as the rule prohibiting nonmarital sex, the existence of gender-specific visiting hours governing Notre Dame's single-sex residence halls, and the university's refusal to officially recognize a gay-straight alliance student group.

Still, the statistics show that Notre Dame is fertile ground for what, on the surface, appears to be a liberal shift: The percentage of Notre Dame students self-classifying as liberal shoots up almost 10 percentage points from freshman to senior year, compared to only a 5.7 percent increase nationwide. The students, faculty members, staff and administrators interviewed for this article provide plenty of anecdotal evidence to confirm student change, but also universally insisted that classifying that change as a merely a liberal shift is overly simplistic.

Instead, members of the Notre Dame community say the change in student worldview is marked by the realization of the world's complexities, more so than a change in political affiliation. The college experience challenges students to

AN OVERSIZED PHOTOGRAPH OF NOAM CHOMSKY, FAMED M.I.T. LINGUIST AND RADICAL LIBERAL COMMENTATOR, HANGS ON THE WALL OF SENIOR SCOTT HAGAN'S OFF-CAMPUS APARTMENT.

KATIE KNAPLETON

COVERSTORY

PERCENTAGE CHANGE AT NOTRE DAME: FRESHMAN TO SENIOR YEAR

LIBERAL

CONSERVATIVE

ANTI-GAY
LAWS

NONMARITAL
SEX

10%

more seniors consider themselves liberal or far left, up to 31.9% from 22.4% freshman year

9%

fewer seniors consider themselves conservative or far right, down to 31.3% from 39.4% freshman year

14%

fewer seniors think there should be laws prohibiting gay relationships, down to 14.9% from 28.9% freshman year

15%

more seniors think nonmarital sex is OK for two people who really like each other, up to 35.9% from 20.7% freshman year

think critically, or to confront why they believe what they believe. "Much of education is an education to complexity and ambiguity," says Dean Mark Roche of the College of Arts and Letters. "One of the things that students learn is that their very strong personal views may not be as clearly grounded as they thought they were." Perhaps the statistical shift, then, emerges from the fact that the average Notre Dame freshman is more likely to be conservative than a freshman elsewhere. If a change in worldview happens here, a shift from conservative to liberal is just statistically more likely. "There's probably a general trend from conservative to liberal because our students come in more conservative," Roche says.

At the same time, a survey conducted this year by Notre Dame's Office for Institutional Research and Campus Ministry reports that 71 percent of Notre Dame student respondents experience an increased level in the depth of their personal spirituality during college. A deepening personal spirituality seems to complement a developing worldview.

However you interpret the numbers, the challenges to students' views arise throughout a Notre Dame education in many ways, perhaps most distinctly in classrooms and residence halls on campus and through study abroad experiences and Catholic Social Teaching-inspired service immersion programs all over the world.

Hagan first began to examine his worldview during a required introductory philosophy course that he took during his first semester at Notre Dame. "I don't think I had ever thought about what I believed the way I was forced to in that class," he says. "I think it's really dangerous if we don't have reasons for what we believe religiously or politically, and I was never really forced to think about that."

The class was taught by Bill Ramsey, a popular philosophy professor who left Notre Dame for UNLV after the spring 2007 semester. Ramsey described the class as a "smorgasbord" of philosophy, as it explored topics ranging from the philosophy of religion to the relationship of bodies and minds. "I deliberately pick topics that are major themes in philosophy but also very provocative," Ramsey wrote in an e-mail. "My view is that I want to upset the students so that they will be thinking and arguing about this stuff outside of class."

Hagan's worldview was most affected by a reading in the class called "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" by Princeton philosopher Peter Singer, who argues that wealthy individuals are morally obligated to donate significant portions of their income to humanitarian efforts. Hagan started to believe that charity is not merely a good act, but an essential one. "No one had a response to Singer's argument. There's no refuting it," Hagan says. "So why don't we live like that? When we hear about poverty, why don't we do something about it?"

Ramsey says that many introductory

philosophy classes, including his own, are designed to challenge students this very way. "Ideally, students will gradually become more critical and more careful thinkers throughout the semester," Ramsey wrote. "We see this all the time, where students initially accept something right away just because it sounds plausible. Then, after 14 weeks, they hear a perspective that initially sounds good, but their immediate response is to more critically examine it, and look for weaknesses. I think that is a good thing."

A class like Ramsey's could exist at practically any university, but there are some unique aspects of the Notre Dame academic experience, deriving primarily from Notre Dame's Catholic identity. Roche believes that this identity lets Notre Dame courses address certain questions that are often ignored or censored at other colleges. "Some of the existential questions that have religious resonance are put front and center in the classroom here, though they would be bracketed at many other schools," he says. "When I interview faculty candidates, a lot of them are excited about the opportunity to engage questions that are considered taboo elsewhere." As many political issues like abortion and gay marriage are also religious issues, Roche says, they can be approached in such a dual way in the Notre Dame classroom.

Theology classes, two of which are mandatory for all Notre Dame students, can also challenge students' perspectives in a way that secular-school required classes cannot. Senior theology and peace

PRO-CHOICE

INCREASED
MILITARY
SPENDINGAFFIRMATIVE
ACTION**11%**

more seniors think abortion should be legal, up to 41.8% from 31% freshman year

19%

fewer seniors think military spending should be increased, down to 15.5% from 34.2% freshman year

11%

more seniors support affirmative action in college admissions, up to 41.2% from 30.1% freshman year

studies major Nick Albares' worldview changed while his spirituality deepened in theology courses, including one called Globalization, Spirituality and Justice taught by the Rev. Daniel Groody, C.S.C., which examined the role of social justice as an integral element of Christian spirituality. "Coming into Notre Dame, I kind of had a narrow view. Notre Dame has really opened that up for me," Albares says.

Looking back, Albares can mark his shifting outlook by noting the changes in the "political views" section of his Facebook profile. He moved from "conservative" as a freshman to "moderate," and then settled on "other," deciding that his commitment to his Catholic faith placed him outside of the standard spectrum. "As opposed to becoming more liberal, I think it's becoming more attuned to the realities in the world, and I think Notre Dame does that out of a sense of mission," Albares says.

While classes can challenge a student's world view in fundamental ways, experience within residence hall communities can provide similar opportunities during late-night discussions or more formal dorm-wide events.

Albares is a resident assistant in Alumni Hall, and he says that the hall staff makes a concerted effort to foster a vibrant community primed for student growth, hoping to turn the dorm into much more than a temporary home. "We try to cultivate in all our residents

an awareness of different things and promote different initiatives," he says, citing a recent environmental T-shirt sale and upcoming dorm-sponsored outings to educational films for AIDS Week. "The idea of living in community is that link between residential life and worldview," Albares says. Sunday-night Mass in the Alumni chapel, Albares says, is the "center-point of the week" and the most visible representation of the dorm's community life.

The university intends for students to have their worldviews expanded through participation in such faith-based, active communities. "The University encourages a way of living consonant with a Christian community and manifest in prayer, liturgy and service," the university's mission statement reads. "Residential life endeavors to develop that sense of community and of responsibility that prepares students for subsequent leadership in building a society that is at once more human and more divine."

Senior Pat Reidy's worldview changed in a concrete, powerful way thanks to an initiative operated out of Sorin College, his residence hall. Since the summer of 2004, Sorin has sponsored a summer-long position for one of its residents at St. Jude Primary School in rural Uganda. Reidy was selected for the spot in 2006 and spent the summer teaching children and living in community with the Holy Cross priests there. He credits his experiences in Sorin for opening him up to the opportunity. "When I was in high school, it really

NOTRE DAME
BY THE NUMBERS

In 2004, members of the incoming freshman class — this year's seniors — participated in the College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey (CSBV), which is coordinated by UCLA's Cooperative Institutional Research Program. In this survey, incoming freshmen at participating colleges and universities across the country are asked to answer questions about their beliefs, opinions and behaviors related to matters political, religious and academic. In the spring of 2007, the students who responded to the 2004 freshman survey were sent a similar, follow-up CSBV, and 685 Notre Dame then-juniors replied.

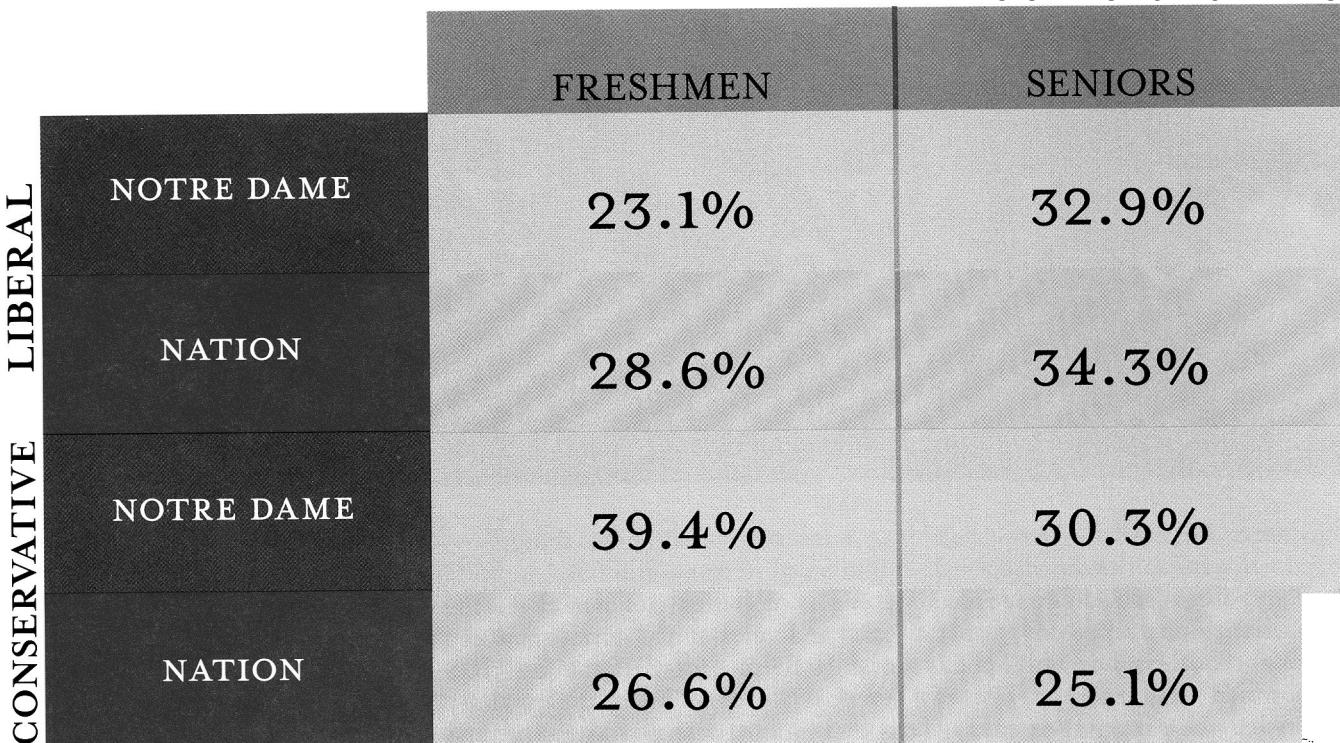
wasn't a big thing to think about the outside world, to think about the poor, to think about the environment. Some of the conversations that ensued in the dorm over the most random stuff would become the most deeply philosophical, ethical and theological conversations," Reidy says. "I think those discussions really opened me up to the possibility of thinking about Uganda as a legit option, as opposed to something that somebody else would do."

Reidy returned to Uganda this past summer and has studied the effect of the nation's politics on primary schooling. "Uganda is not the reality I live within, yet it is a reality in the world in which I live," he says. "It's something I realized I need to appreciate and act upon, having an obligation based on the fact that I live at Notre Dame, where I do have the ability to do something about it." To that end, Reidy started a personal fundraising campaign for the school and has raised close to 40,000 dollars. "We could build the finest school in Uganda for less than it takes to run Notre Dame for a day!" Reidy writes in a brochure available in Sorin.

Since his powerful experiences of community with the Holy Cross priests at the mission near St. Jude, Reidy has entered into a strong discernment of

COVER STORY

STUDENTS' POLITICAL VIEWS



Source: 2007 College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey

Additional students reported "middle-of-the-road."

the priesthood. "As far as being a faithful person, it's a lot easier when you're ignorant of some of the truly horrid realities of the world," he says. "I have had to really evaluate and reevaluate my faith and whether or not it's a true faith or whether it's a blind, ignorant faith. I look at that as a great thing."

Riedy's worldview was dramatically affected by his international experience, and many students take advantage of other off-campus opportunities while attending Notre Dame. Almost 60 percent of Notre Dame students study abroad during their collegiate career, which is the sixth-highest percentage in the nation. For Hagan, his semester spent in Monterrey, Mexico further developed his worldview by allowing him to see the United States through a new lens. "My program was unique in that there was over 500 international students from all over the world, so I heard the opinions of people from a number of different countries," he says. "It was surprising to see a general consensus of tremendous dislike for our current administration, and also considerably more progressive

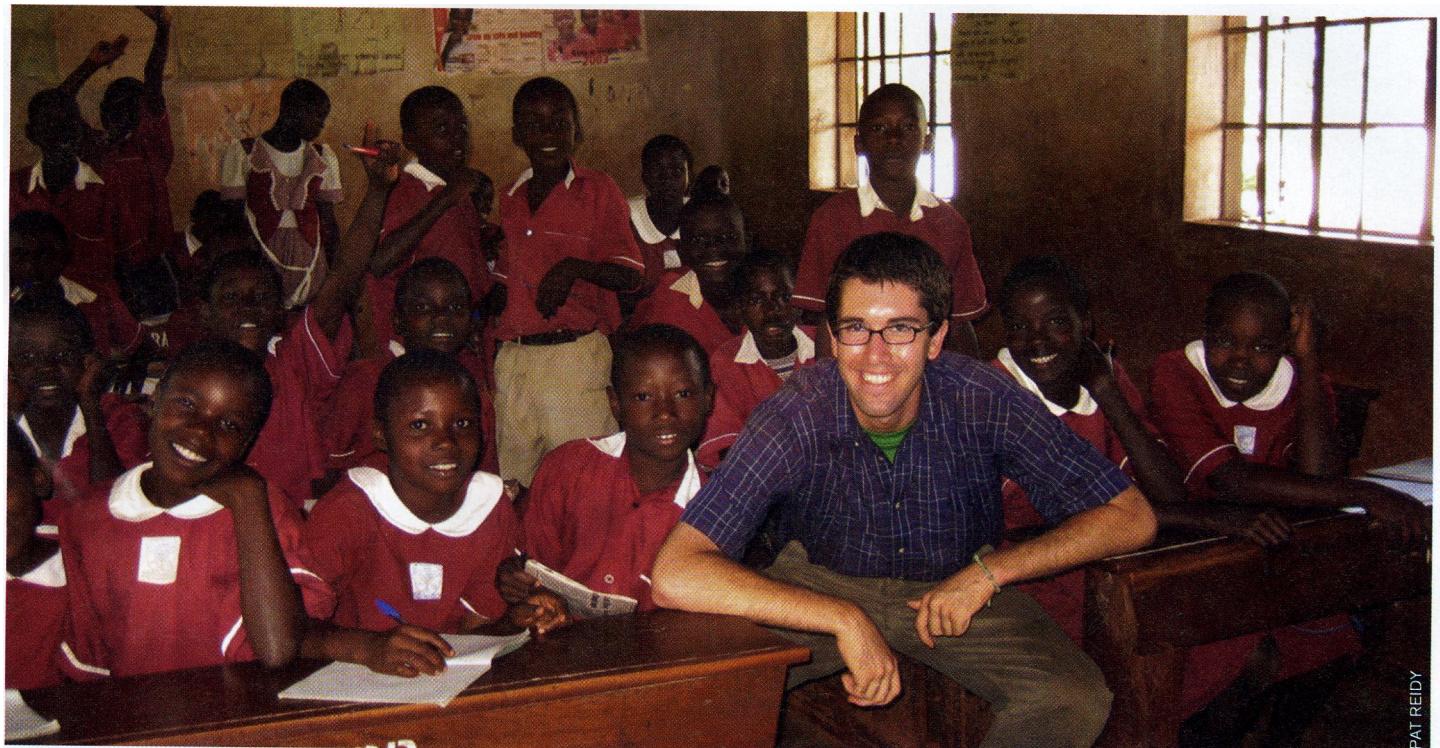
political views than the ones I had been exposed to in the States."

Dr. Tony Messina, acting assistant provost for international studies, believes perspective-altering experiences like Hagan's are the hallmark of study abroad programs, often affecting the way students see and approach important world issues. "It's part and parcel of the abroad experience that students come into contact with people who get them to refocus their thinking about what it means to be an American and how Americans are different from other people," Messina says. "I think students develop a window into the complexity of the world and into the nuances of other societies' international questions." The complexities of the world that Notre Dame students can explore in classrooms and dorm rooms intensify when a student finds him or herself immersed in an unfamiliar culture.

In addition to study abroad experiences, each year hundreds of students see more of the world through participation in off-campus service immersion programs through the Center for Social Concerns, working in places from Appalachia to India. Steph Gharakhanian, who

graduated in 2007 with degrees in peace studies and pre-professional studies, got involved with the Notre Dame Peace Coalition as a freshman, which exposed her to the range of opportunities available at the center. As she grew more active, she learned how faith inspires Notre Dame's social justice efforts. "Prior to Notre Dame, I had never encountered Catholic Social Teaching, I had never heard of people like Dorothy Day and Oscar Romero, these incredible Catholic voices for peace and justice," Gharakhanian wrote in an e-mail. "So, it wasn't until Notre Dame that issues of peace and justice became a matter of faith." Gharakhanian then spent a summer in Cambodia on an International Summer Service Learning Program through the center. "It wasn't until Cambodia that I came to understand how extensive of an impact war has on a country," Gharakhanian wrote. "After Cambodia, the issues that I encountered in my peace studies classes were no longer abstract."

Similar to Albares, Gharakhanian is hesitant to label her growth "liberal." "Personally, I don't know if I became more politically liberal while at ND,



PAT REIDY

ST. JUDE PRIMARY SCHOOL SENIOR PAT REIDY HAS RAISED ALMOST 40,000 DOLLARS FOR THE ST. JUDE PRIMARY SCHOOL IN UGANDA.

but I do know that I was able to live out my values more by doing things such as service and by getting involved in various CSC initiatives," she wrote. "Service, particularly I think, for me at least, didn't radicalize me, but made the preexisting values that I carried so much more personal, because I could associate names and faces with the causes that I had always been involved in."

The Rev. Bill Lies, C.S.c., director of the center, emphasizes that the role of the CSC is not to be a clearinghouse for volunteers, but a place where community-based learning, inspired by Catholic Social Teaching, can educate students about the world and broaden their outlook. "Here at the Center for Social Concerns, the local community, the national and even the global communities become our classroom. We push the walls of the classroom into those issues, and that's why the CSC has such an impact on our students and opens up their perspective," he says.

The experiential learning that students participate in through the center as undergraduates has an effect on each senior class, as about 10 percent of each graduating class - or just over

200 students - goes on to do full-time service for a year or two after commencement. The number is so high that the center hired Liz Mackenzie (ND '97), who serves as the director of senior transition programs. Mackenzie counsels seniors on post-graduate service opportunities and teaches a one-credit discernment class for students trying to determine how to incorporate justice and faith into their lives after graduation. "There's more awareness on this campus of post-grad service as a real option than at other schools," Mackenzie, who has previously worked at Boston College, says. "It's part of the culture here." Mackenzie says that Notre Dame is compared to the University of Michigan for both Peace Corps and Teach for America recruitment, despite the fact that Michigan's undergraduate population outnumbers Notre Dame's three to one.

Gharakhanian was one of the 211 members of the class of 2007 to pursue post-graduate service, and she's currently working for Peace Action Maine through the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC). "Ultimately, I would say that I chose to do JVC so I could live out the values

that my ND education and involvement nurtured within me," she wrote.

Looking at the statistics in the light of these students' stories, it is not sufficient to simply conclude that students become more politically liberal at Notre Dame, and stop there. A deeper change is happening, in classrooms and dorm rooms, in Mexico and Cambodia. The world becomes more complex than it ever appeared in high school.

This development is at the heart of Notre Dame's mission as a Catholic institution. "We're failing our students at Notre Dame if they're not leaving here asking some fundamental social questions about our responsibility as people of faith," Lies says. "Our people should be different than a student graduating from some other university. There should be a Notre Dame difference."

For Hagan, despite his self-proclaimed socialistic political leanings, the way he sees the world now goes far beyond politics. "It's not so much about your political views. As long as you're working for justice, you can find common ground with a lot of people," he says. "It's not a political thing, it's a human thing." +