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**International Volunteer Service: Good Intentions Are Not Enough**

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The last decade has seen the proliferation of international volunteer programs and international service-learning courses offered by American colleges and universities. Such opportunities send undergraduate and graduate students abroad to work with local nonprofits and other community partners. Think of students building a health clinic on an alternative spring break, teaching English in remote villages, or holding babies in an orphanage.

We have followed and been a part of the growth of this pedagogical approach, building programs and researching their results. Our experience has made it clear that we need to better understand what exactly these volunteer activities are producing for the students and communities. The future of this field will be best served when practice is closely linked to research. As a field, service learning has made progress in this area, though much remains to be done so that the possible positive outcomes do not get lost despite its best intentions.

If there is one common theme on which nearly all of us in this field agree, it is that these types of service experiences must simultaneously contribute to student development across a whole host of areas—including international awareness, intercultural relations, and international career intentions—and make significant contributions with the communities where our students work. Those contributions can be "just being an extra pair of hands" or actually transferring skills or building capacity, like training local preventative-health volunteers on effective practices. And in the end, we all share the goal of increasing our collective sense of humanity. But we must continually ask whether we are doing enough to create benefits for the students and the local communities. To foster this discussion, here are suggestions on how best to run international service efforts based on the growing evidence from burgeoning research and field experience.

**Begin with the end in mind.** Service learning must be directed by its goals, focusing on achieving positive outcomes for all the groups involved: the host communities, the students, and the institutions we represent. This win-win-win is achievable, but requires negotiation and understanding of social, economic, and
political dynamics. America's imperialistic past is not so distant. Having the community's goals front and center is important lest this become "self-service" for the students or institution only. This means knowing what the community's assets and self-identified needs are and matching these to what the students are capable of providing. Without this match, we run the risk of actually doing harm.

**Emphasize and "process" the process.** Achieving the proverbial win-win-win means forming partnerships for the long term. Arrangements are not just made and service activities executed; expectations and relationships across all the groups involved require careful management. As our campuses have learned through our community engagement at home, sometimes faculty members and students do not bring adequate nuance to the partnership dance. Having staff with knowledge of community-engagement theories and skills in negotiation as well as international experience is a fundamental piece of any international-service arrangement, be it a student-driven alternative break or an endowed chair's international service-learning course. That said, no partnership or service experience will be completely smooth even with this seasoned support. The world is far less predictable than the classroom, but therein lies opportunities for learning, on all sides. A core component of international or domestic service is reflection, the opportunity to "process" the process. One thing that we do know for sure is that this kind of reflection, which is sometimes resisted by our students (and our professors) fearing that they are engaging in some kind of group therapy, leads to many of the positive outcomes we seek for our students and host communities.

**Promote depth of experience.** While we do not yet fully understand the most effective ways to pursue international service, a few practices are promising. Students are more valuable to the host community and enrich the cross-cultural experience when they speak the local language. Host organizations, in particular, say they are better able to use volunteers with language skills. It is unclear the merits of home stays versus dormlike or other communal student living; the right approach may depend on the specific goals, with more cultural immersion likely from the home stays, for example. Somewhat connected to the previous two suggestions, the depth of experience increases with the longevity of the experience—both the length of the service and the length of the partnership between the sending institutions and community partners. We know that this longevity is good not only for student outcomes but also for making real contributions with our community partners.

**Include follow-on learning.** As compared with a standard
course, with its clear beginning and conclusion at the end of a semester, immersive service is an experience—an experience that does not end when the service activities do. It is at this point that the real learning may take place. Students return to campus, where there is often a stark juxtaposition between their campus bubble and the culture they lived in and the conditions they experienced. We have heard from colleagues that higher education has yet to fully maximize this "post-experience" phase. How do we institutionalize this phase in our curricula and cocurricular offerings such that students can translate their experiences back to their lives on campus? They should be able to say what they learned about themselves and the world and how their learning will inform their choice of courses, majors, and careers. This learning, like all meaningful learning, takes time to develop.

**Own it.** A host organization or community member often does not remember the student group's name or the multi-clause title of the course under which the service was performed. They remember the name of the higher-education institution that sponsored it. (And they also remember the country the students represent.) As such, the service is performed by our institutions and those who represent us. Our central academic administrators should not have a laissez-faire approach to service just because it may be performed under the banner of student life or coursework. We have an ethical obligation to recognize the larger endorsement that is implied and thereby encourage the use of effective practices.

The stakes are higher when the learning moves outside the protected confines of the classroom. A poorly managed service trip or service-learning course can hurt the communities that are letting us in and their views of our institutions and the country or countries we represent. Also harmed is our students' understanding of their larger place in the world. As internationalization in higher education continues to expand, there should be a concerted but cautious embrace of international service, an embrace that is based on research and committed to developing it. This continued development begs for careful evaluation and assessment both on individual campuses and across institutions, ensuring that international service represents more than good intentions.

Thank you so much for this article. I am in the middle of teaching a seminar class where we will travel to Puerto Rico for a service learning trip, and these are great things to keep in mind. I think the reflection piece cannot be emphasized enough!