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# The Value and Importance of International Service Learning Programs: A Model for Human Service Education

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# **The Value and Importance of International Service Learning Programs: A Model for Human Service Education**

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## **Abstract**

Given our growing globalized society, students are studying abroad at increasing rates. While different formats of study abroad programs exist, there is a surge in the number of short-term international service learning programs. This manuscript defines service learning and discusses the benefits of international service learning programs, specifically for human service students. The manuscript will conclude with a model of a successful study abroad program in San Jose, Costa Rica for undergraduate human service students led by two faculty members.

## **The Value and Importance of International Service Learning Programs: A Model for Human Service Education**

The United States is a globalized society that demands the understanding of and the ability to work with people from diverse cultural groups. As globalization expands, institutes of higher education have recognized the strategic importance of international educational opportunities (Wang, Peyvandi, & Moghaddam, 2011). Currently, more than 85% of United States colleges and universities offer study abroad programs (Whalen, 2008). Additionally, the number of American students studying abroad has more than doubled in the last 10 years, with particular increases in short term programs and international service learning opportunities (Mapp, 2011; Pariola & Pariola, 2010). This manuscript specifically examines short-term study abroad programs and discusses the benefits of international service learning opportunities, especially in regards to human service students. Also included is a model of a successful human service specific service learning study abroad program in San Jose, Costa Rica.

## **Literature Review**

### **Short-term Study Abroad Programs**

Study abroad programs have been classified into three distinct categories: island programs, direct enrollment/full immersion programs, and hybrid programs (Porcano, 2011). Within island programs, faculty from a home university lead a

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group of students in a short-term program abroad (approximately one to two weeks) where they participate in site visits and/or cultural events. In direct enrollment/full immersion programs, students generally apply to a university abroad and are accepted (for semester or year-long stay). Hybrid programs typically share elements of both island programs as well as direct enrollment/full immersion programs (Porcano, 2011).

Currently hybrid programs, also referred to as short-term programs, represent over half of the study abroad population (Mapp, 2011). Despite the shorter length of these programs, students still benefit and there appears to be no significant outcome differences based on the program format (Norris & Dwyer, 2005). Furthermore, shorter-term programs may be more attractive to students who may not be inclined to go abroad for longer periods of time (Norris & Dwyer, 2005; Mapp, 2011). Shorter-term programs can also provide students with the confidence to later participate in semester or year-long full immersion/direct enrollment programs. Many faculty members prefer shorter-term programs because they have more control over the planning of student activities. For example, faculty can design a course that aligns with their university or professional accreditation standards and, as a result, learning can occur in a more focused and intentional manner (Mapp, 2011).

### **International Service Learning Programs**

While varying definitions of service learning exist, there is consensus that service learning programs include activities in the community, particular rendering of a service, attainment of curricular credit, application or development of skills, and practice of structured reflection, in the form of journal responses and/or a final report (Mooney & Edwards, 2001; Wessel, 2007). In service learning programs, the service component is not an additional requirement or course add-on. Rather, the key is integrating service with learning (Pariola & Pariola, 2006). This integration is also found in international service learning programs.

International service learning programs share many similarities with traditional study abroad programs. However, a distinguishing component is the emphasis placed on community-based service activities (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). Research indicates that the potential benefits of service learning on an international scale are multiplied (Pariola & Pariola, 2006). International service learning programs promote growth in a variety of different domains. For example,

students demonstrate growth in intercultural development, reporting significant increases in intercultural sensitivity and cultural awareness (Sindt & Pachmayer, 2005). Furthermore, international service learning programs can promote the value of responsible global citizenship in students and provide students with skills that position them at an advantage in our competitive global marketplace (Grusky, 2000). Students also exhibit growth in personal and academic domains with increased rates of motivation, understanding, and retention of academic material (Wessel, 2007). Additionally, students reported increased levels of empathy, an increased development of their professional identity, and an expanded commitment to social justice issues and advocacy (Mapp, 2011).

### **Relevance to the Field of Human Services**

Over the last 10 years, research has focused on the value and importance of service learning, specifically in human service education (Desmond & Stahl, 2011; Woodside, Carruth, Clapp & Robertson, 2006). Given the focus on interdisciplinary helping in the human services field, the combination of human services and service learning creates a dynamic where the results are mutually beneficial; the community, the student, and the university can benefit from service learning experiences (Desmond & Stahl, 2011). Through service learning experiences, human services students can gain increased knowledge of the human services field and they can critically evaluate and reflect on their pre-service training. Additionally, service learning in human service students also enhances the development of communication skills, self-reflection, and confidence (Woodside, Carruth, Clapp & Robertson, 2006). While the benefits of service learning are clear to human service students, there is a lack of research available on international service learning programs in human service literature.

### **Model International Service Learning Program**

The authors of this manuscript led a short-term/island program service learning study abroad program to San Jose, Costa Rica during their university spring break for nine days. This program took on the common components of service learning and study abroad programs, which included community events, a service component, college credit, reflective activities, and cultural awareness. Students were required to complete both the academic and experiential components of the course. The main focus of the course was skill development; thus, students were required to read a text on helping skills with the goal of

learning these skills (and eventually applying the skills in their service learning activities). In preparation for travel, students also read a text on Costa Rica and began relating human service skills to the culture prior to departure in discussions and reflective activities. A large component of the course was also focused on guided reflection with instructor feedback, prior to travelling to Costa Rica and upon the students' return. Students were also required to complete an electronic portfolio at the end of the semester, which required the students to reflect on their use of various helping skills in their service learning activities. Students reflected on barriers, cultural differences, and cultural awareness while discussing their integration and use of specific human service skills.

While in Costa Rica, the students participated in three service learning activities at various human service agencies near San Jose. They had the opportunity to interact with the elderly, orphans, and severely ill children and their families. After each service learning activity, the faculty led the students in group reflections and also required the students to reflect individually on their experiences. Consistent with previous reports on the benefits of international service learning programs, the students reported both personal and professional gains in their journal entries. For example, they revealed higher levels of empathy and an increased comfort level working with diverse populations. They also discussed the integration of human service skills and the impact of cultural differences in the use of these skills. Additionally, students reported how they overcame challenges with language barriers and they discussed an increased sensitivity and awareness of the culture in their service delivery. Overall, students wrote that they highly valued their experience in Costa Rica and they synthesized their experiences to apply it to their future professional goals in the human services field.

### **Conclusion**

International service learning programs that are short term are beneficial to human service students. These programs create a holistic opportunity for student learning that is focused on skill development, servicing diverse populations, building advanced skills, mediating cultural awareness and sensitivity to client needs as well as providing opportunities for creative reflection. The successful model presented here can be mimicked by human service programs who desire to create an international study abroad program that meets educational requirements as well as fosters a higher level of critical thinking and advanced skill

development. This model was successful not only because it took on the characteristics of short term service learning programs and short term study abroad programs but its success laid in the integration of these concepts while also reflecting on experiences and differences in the culture.

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