

Global and Local Learning: The Benefits of International Service Learning

Service learning in an international context has been with us in fledgling form since the mid to late 1970s, and in the 1990s has gained momentum. In 1998 the International Partnership for Service Learning, with support from the Ford Foundation, hosted a conference at the Wingspread Conference Center and conducted a worldwide survey on service learning. Their survey resulted in descriptions of service learning at 97 institutions in 32 countries (Berry and Chisolm, 1999). Although this study provides a description of only a small fraction of the service learning practiced across the globe, it may be the first attempt to describe the vast array of service learning programs in the world. It was a very worthwhile effort and as the authors of this study state:

...there is a commonality among [those] who are troubled by the social and educational problems before them.... [and] find encouragement from [those] who are finding that joining service and learning is a powerful combination for reforming education and addressing needs that would otherwise remain unmet (p. 7).

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* adds to the literature on successful programs that use experiential forms of study to further understanding among the peoples of the world. We believe that these efforts are critical if higher education is to help inculcate the ideals of world citizenship among the students we teach and provide models for people-to-people understanding.

The articles that follow range broadly, partially because international service learning takes many forms, and, in fact, the topics of two of the articles are not true service learning at all. One, by Nolan and Elliott, focuses on using cooperative education in an international context. Although not service learning in its truest form, the co-op experience provides students with many of the positive outcomes that service learning does. The second, by Ryan, describes the powerful influence that a lifetime of volunteer service has had on the shaping of a faculty member. Other articles reflect the varied pedagogical strategies that faculty employ in their service learning programs, strategies that clearly evolve over time as a program finds its niche in another country. The issues faculty and administrators must deal with during the planning and implementation phases of these programs are described with the hope that others can avoid the known problems and be prepared to respond effectively to issues not yet anticipated. Without question, these authors have seen the overwhelmingly positive effects that service learning provides to students, faculty, and residents of host communities.

Lessons from the Field

As educators at metropolitan institutions we need to regularly ask ourselves how we can better serve our students as we prepare them to be successful in the world outside the university; expand their often narrow set of experiences; connect the real world with our students' educational experience; remain relevant to our external communities; and seek and develop in ourselves, our students, and our citizens a healthy respect for the interconnecting, evolving, global world of the twenty-first century.

Our collective experience organizing and implementing service learning programs in international contexts has taught us much that can help serve our students better in the ways enumerated above. In summary, the following basic lessons have emerged to guide our thinking as we develop new programs and ways to guide our students back on the home campus.

For the host communities where we will learn and serve, we must

- Recognize the inherent capacity of every human being and of the communities in which they live;
- Realize that within each community aspirations and needs vary from individual to individual, and household to household;
- Respect each person; you are a guest in someone else's life; and
- Learn to be kind and caring, not controlling and exploitive.

In preparing faculty and students for a service learning experience, we must

- Observe before coming to conclusions rather than entering a community thinking we already have all the answers to their needs and problems;
- Think analytically and critically by asking real world questions in new environments;
- Learn by doing to connect theory with reality; and
- Be careful to do no harm; seek to understand before seeking to be understood.

After return to our institutions, we must

- Find appropriate means to share the new understanding of how our former hosts view their world, and begin in a modest way to expand the horizons of those who have not yet experienced service learning;
- Continue to carefully cultivate relationships with international communities and seek their feedback about how to improve future experiences for all involved; and
- Recognize that it takes both time and commitment to effect positive change.

These lessons provide the *raison d'être* for service learning in an international context and show why it is so important to provide this type of quality educational experience for our students.

Service Learning and the Educational Mission

Metropolitan universities and other institutions of higher education serving urban populations in the United States have the daunting task of preparing students to assume “good citizen” roles in a world increasingly integrated by the forces of globalization. Traditionally, one of the primary roles of higher education has been to develop the capacity of young men and women to provide leadership in their society. The need for a broadly educated society capable of understanding the complexities and nuances of an increasingly global economic, political, and social environment has never been greater. It is critical to understand the relationships between involved citizenship and a good society; between volunteerism and self understanding and personal growth; between the importance of critical observation and informed involvement; and between an individual’s moral and ethical development and understanding of how others interpret the world.

Efforts to globalize or internationalize the curriculum are part of academic reform initiatives across the country and are important in developing these sensibilities. To provide faculty and students with opportunities to develop a civic consciousness that extends beyond the borders of their city, state, or nation, is a logical extension of such initiatives. International service learning, although still in its infancy within many institutions, is one way to combine academically-based enhanced understanding of the world with community-based practical experiences designed to benefit all involved. A relatively innovative approach to experiential education, international service learning has a highly diverse (broad spectrum) set of activities that must be adapted to specific university environments, to a variety of faculty interests and styles, and to the culture and world view of the host communities.

The Rationale for International Service Learning

Service learning provides students and faculty an opportunity to engage with their local, national, or international communities in powerful ways, and many have commented on its importance. For example, Colin Bundy, vice-chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa recently stated:

Universities are deeply implicated in the modern state and are key agents of modern society. This means that they should be conscious of, and make choices about, the *terms* of that involvement... [They] can be the brains and the skilled hands of their immediate community; but they can also be the conscience, the source of reflection, and a shaping imagination for change. Higher education *must* be critically engaged in the needs of communities, nations, and the world: not least because it may just be the last, best hope that communities, nations, and the world have for considering what, why, and how they do things (Berry and Chisolm, 1999, p. 10).

Through service learning, whether local or international, the university can provide a significant platform for contributing skills, perspective, leadership, idea development, and practical experience to its many constituencies. In the process, the univer-

sity receives, by reflecting on its own values and how those values are demonstrated in practical ways through student and faculty involvement in the community, a better understanding of its own role in and relevance to modern society and of the importance of the university in the global environment.

Themes in Understanding International Service Learning

Citizenship Development and Globalization

International service learning programs share the common goal of developing students' civic consciousness and raising it to a global level. Because students appear to be less politically and socially involved in an era in which global issues have become increasingly important, this is essential.

The Higher Education Research Institute (at the University of California at Los Angeles) conducts an annual study on freshman national norms. The fall 1999 study indicates that students' long term goals for social activism are on the decline. For example,

- The percentage of freshmen who feel it is very important or essential for them to influence social values fell to 35.8 percent, the lowest since 1986;
- The desire to participate in community action programs also fell to its lowest point in over a decade, 21.3 percent;
- Interest in becoming a community leader dropped to 28.0 percent;
- Interest in helping clean up the environment fell to 17.9 percent;
- Interest in helping promote racial understanding fell to 28.4 percent; and,
- Only 23 percent of freshmen believe that racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in the U.S., its highest percentage ever (Higher Education Research Institute, 1999).

These attitudes are disturbing in a world that appears to be more problem-ridden and divisive than at any time in its history.

Service learning also has a positive effect on the families who host students and the residents of the communities in which the students practice their service learning. Experience indicates that communities see these programs as providing important cross cultural experiences and as enriching, rather than encroaching on, their communities. This is especially true when program design includes local residents, through participation in course work or service, in part or all of the service learning experience. In this way, mutual understanding of both the elements of our common humanity, as well as our social, cultural, political and economic differences, is enhanced. Our experience suggests that often the gap in understanding of these differences can be bridged through the shared experiences of learning to live and work together.

International service learning programs help provide needed and appreciated services in other communities. However, it is critical that the service projects are mutually defined and developed with the host community. Who will determine what type of help or service is needed, and who may actually benefit from these programs, are recurrent questions to consider in program development. If one of the primary objectives of international service learning is to emphasize the importance of citizenship in a global society, then the interests of as wide a range of stakeholders as possible are critical. It

is not enough to define the service as desirable or good in the eyes of only the U.S. participants, but rather that the design and implementation of the project truly reflect collaboration and an understanding of the social values of all involved.

Student Benefits

In this rapidly changing world, those students who develop intercultural competency and other skills they can take into their adult lives and careers after graduation will be better prepared to find their place in and make a contribution to the global society. This is not always obvious to U.S. students who may be blinded by the realities of a world that is not exactly like their own, and it may be especially true for students attending metropolitan universities, many of whom are first generation college students who have not benefitted from travel and experiencing people unlike themselves.

It does not matter to what career students eventually aspire; the international service learning experience will benefit them immensely. Students are able to test, integrate, and synthesize classroom-based knowledge and skills in the real world. Thus, students begin to connect theory with application, finding a way to make theory fit real world experiences. They learn the value of working and living in groups, often in unfamiliar and emotionally and physically challenging circumstances. By dealing with cultural situations that they are not used to, they develop an increased sense of self-confidence and self-worth. Most tangible is the joy that comes with the experience of new music styles and diverse food choices. These rewards are the result of students learning more about negotiation, compromise, service, and sharing in a new cultural context. The memories of these experiences are among the most powerful and permanent for students after graduation. A sense of accomplishment, new skills, and enhanced self-esteem are all valuable assets for life.

Students who participate in these programs serve as role models for other students who may be peers who are less fluent in the local language or have comparatively fewer experiences in the host country, or students from the host country with whom they will have both the opportunity to learn from and to teach. Our experience has shown that returning international service learning students, by their enthusiasm about the experiences, their often newly found maturity, and their interest in recruiting their fellow students to join an international service learning project in the future, become important role models back on campus. They are likely to enroll in foreign language, international study, and ethnic studies courses, often for the first time.

Personal growth, in areas of increased self-awareness, self-confidence, leadership, and awareness of opportunities, is tremendous. It is often a life-changing experience. Students say

Service learning gives me a first-hand experience of team work and brings me in contact with people.

I have learned so much from this experience, much more than I could give.

I am a more effective person because of learning outside the area I grew up in.

I learned how insular we are in Texas and how much more I have to learn from other people. I changed my major and now know what I want to accomplish in life.

We all know that education can be a life-changing event, but the experiences of international service learning students that we have known far transcend what happens in the traditional classroom. Because in international contexts service learning students often experience radically unfamiliar circumstances, they are forced to cooperatively negotiate problems, not only in the classroom but also of day-to-day living. Frequently students return to campus bonded with their group, more extroverted than before, eager to share a new world of ideas and images they have acquired, and in many cases become more serious and successful students.

Institutional Issues and Benefits

Many institutions today, from small liberal arts colleges in rural areas to institutions in our largest cities, are in the process of or considering internationalizing their curriculum. International service learning can be either an impetus to this globalization effort or a byproduct of the process. As an impetus, it may be the result of pioneering efforts of a few faculty who develop small scale service learning programs, and then attribute the success of their students to the service learning experience. These small successes may spur the development of broad-based efforts to expand the curriculum in international directions. On the other hand, as a byproduct of a well-developed international curriculum, it may be an attempt by faculty to instill a practicality in the global curriculum. Whichever, it successfully reduces parochialism among students, provides alternate means of making intellectual and interdisciplinary connections, and thereby broadens students' educational experiences.

Institutions do need to become acquainted with a variety of issues that will complicate development of these kinds of programs. For example,

- Faculty and administrators must sharpen their own intercultural skills and abilities to effectively plan and negotiate activities in a global environment. This most often requires a network of international contacts that may exist among a few faculty members or administrators. If not, collaboration with other institutions to develop these linkages is a viable alternative;
- Setting up these programs is resource intensive, and requires collaboration between administration and faculty;
- Faculty and administrators need to become acquainted with the relevant legal issues and prepare themselves and students properly to respond quickly to unexpected events that may threaten participants' safety;
- An incentive structure for the amount of work required may not be in place, and it is common that service learning faculty do not receive the same tenure and promotion consideration for these types of activities; and

- There is a need to instill a sense of responsibility, within the student group and the institution, to the host communities involved. Team building and teamwork among all involved is extremely important.

A Call to Practice

The potential for developing and expanding international service learning at metropolitan universities is enormous. If we believe in the reality of the global world, then we have an obligation to our students and our global neighbors to provide the opportunity for collaboration for mutually beneficial learning. Although many institutions have not adopted the practice, it is one well worth exploring. The old adage of “think globally, act locally” needs revision. We need to think and act both globally and locally if we are to solve the myriad problems in our cities and across the globe.

Among our nearby international neighbors, opportunities abound that allow costs to be kept to a minimum. Short stays of two to four weeks can be justified because of relatively low travel costs. For metropolitan universities, partnerships can be developed with other institutions in nearby regions, including community colleges, with an eye towards building collaborative relationships that open the possibility for additional choices, for both faculty and students, in service learning locales and content.

Our experience is that students at large urban institutions desire these experiences if they are affordable and developed with an understanding of the needs of metropolitan students. And, it is clear that the result is an intellectually enriched and action-oriented student who understands and cares more about his fellow citizens, both at home and abroad.

Suggested Readings

Berry, H. A., and L. A. Chisholm, *Service Learning in Higher Education Around the World: An Initial Look* (New York: The International Partnership for Service Learning, 1999).

The Higher Education Research Institute, *The American Freshman National Norms for 1999* (Los Angeles: Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, 1999).

Special Note of Thanks:

A journal requires the effort of many people to move from a mere idea into the real paper copy held in the hands of readers, and this journal has benefitted greatly from the attention and support of a strong team. This issue marks the end of a long-time partnership between the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities and Towson University in support of the publication aspects of Metropolitan Universities journal. Recent decisions to retire or to follow the dream of a new career opportunity have led the journal's two publishing staff members at Towson in new directions. As a result, publication activities of the journal will transfer to Northern Kentucky University during Summer 2000.

As Executive Editor, I offer sincere thanks to Publisher Marilyn Mattsson and Editorial Assistant Judith Stoffer for their careful and dedicated work, high standards, good sense of humor, and attention to detail. Your interest in making the journal the best it could be was always apparent in all you did. Best wishes to you both in your new endeavors; your involvement will be missed.

In addition, we are all deeply indebted to Towson President Hoke L. Smith for his attentive leadership and strong advocacy for the journal's purposes and potential from its earliest days. He offered continuity and key support through several critical transitions, and ensured the journal's success. No one has a greater sense of the journal's role in promoting understanding of metropolitan universities. I am grateful for his continued participation on the Editorial Board.

Thanks to all at Towson University who have been a part of the journal's extended family for many years!

—*Barbara A. Holland*
Executive Editor

