

## **Students Serving Abroad: A Framework for Inquiry**

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### **Abstract**

International service by students is gaining greater attention at colleges and universities around the world. Some research has examined the effects of international service for students, but relatively few studies have examined outcomes for host communities and sponsoring organizations, including colleges and universities. Beginning with an examination of theoretical and empirical research from the fields of international volunteerism, international service-learning, and international study abroad, this article proposes a framework for inquiry on international service programs. It suggests that differences in outcomes for students, host communities, and home colleges and universities are the result of variations in individual and institutional characteristics and service activities. Finally, the article considers implications for future research, including hypotheses and research designs to test differences across programs and educational institutions.

### **Introduction**

Growing numbers of students are engaging in international service. Although precise data on students serving abroad are unavailable, anecdotal evidence, along with an upward trend in study abroad programs more generally, suggests substantial growth. In 2010, for instance, more than 270,000 United States college and university students studied in another country, a four-fold increase since the late 1980s (*Chalou & Gliozzo, 2011; Institute of International Education, 2011*). Despite the increasing research attention on students serving abroad, empirical evidence on numbers, scope, types, and outcomes is only beginning to emerge (*Bringle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2011*).

The focus of this essay is on the outcomes of international service by students. We propose a conceptual approach and empirical evidence for understanding factors that shape outcomes for student participants, sponsoring institutions, and host communities. The essay begins with a discussion of the global context and a schematic depiction of programs that send students abroad for service. Next, a conceptual model and research evidence for understanding how individual and institutional factors affect outcomes of service

is presented. Finally, implications are addressed for international service by students along with key research questions and research designs to test differences in outcomes across programs.

### **Rise of Global Education**

In a global world, it is important to know how to live and work with people from widely diverse backgrounds. To help prepare students for work and life in what one scholar has called a “disordered, messy, and confusing” world, colleges and universities have a growing interest in exposing students to different cultures and diverse social, economic, and political systems (Nolan, 2009, p. 269; see also Latta, Faucher, Brown, & Bradshaw, 2011). In 2006, for example, approximately 40% of higher education institutions made specific reference to international or global education in their mission statements—up from 28% in 2001 (Green, Luu, & Burris, 2008).

Scholars and practitioners suggest that it is important for students to develop global or intercultural competence, or the “ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). Teaching global competence introduces an applied dimension to learning that aims to develop “tacit knowledge” that cannot be taught directly through traditional academic pursuits. Rather, it is acquired by “everyday experiences” that teach people how to solve practical problems (Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). Depending on the type of experience, level of immersion, and other key factors, students may gain intercultural skills relatively quickly in international service programs.

Despite the potential benefits, the idea of students serving abroad is controversial. On one hand, proponents suggest that service abroad in higher education may contribute to student learning, personal connections to others, intercultural skills, global understanding, civic engagement, and also possibly to tangible contributions to people’s well-being (Braskamp, 2008; Kauffmann, Martin, & Weaver, 1992; Kiely, 2004; Parker & Dautoff, 2007). Moreover, service abroad by students may help build the international competence and reputations of universities.

On the other hand, skeptics raise questions of efficiency, environmental impact, and use of developing countries as “global playgrounds” for privileged students to engage in exploitative third world or poverty tourism (Gössling, Hall, & Scott, 2009; Simpson, 2004; Smith & Laurie, 2011, p. 555) without having to confront the “harshest inequities of north-south relations” (Grusky, 2000, p. 861). Among the most problematic objections is that international service does

not always challenge students to understand global realities, and may, in fact, offer little benefit—perhaps even harm—to host communities. Twenty years ago in Mexico, Ivan Illich put it bluntly to a group of prospective North American volunteers:

Not only is there a gulf between what you have and what others have which is much greater than the one existing between you and the poor in your own country, but there is also a gulf between what you feel and what the Mexican people feel that is incomparably greater. (1990, p. 318)

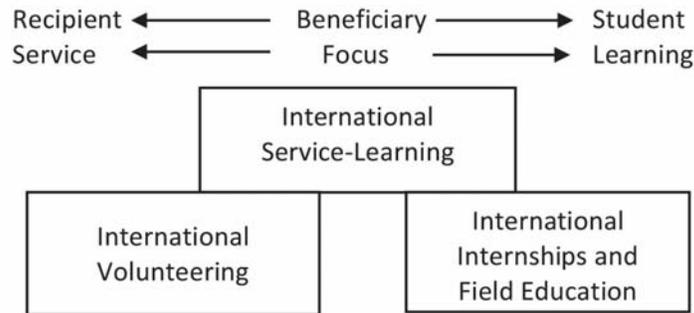
Although the field lacks comprehensive data on students in international service, the literature suggests that international volunteers tend to be young, educated, affluent, and White (Kiely, 2004; Lough, 2010; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). Older adults, people with low incomes, ethnic and racial minorities, people with disabilities, and those who cannot take time off work or school are less likely to serve internationally (McBride & Lough, 2007). In U.S. study abroad programs, only 4.2% of participants are African American and only 6% are Latino (Picard, Bernardino, & Ehigiator, 2009). These disparities in participation require greater scrutiny.

## **International Service in Higher Education**

International service programs in higher education are often integrated into degree programs. A wide array of models are represented, including international volunteering, service-learning, field education, and internships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). In this article, the term “universities” is used inclusively to refer to community colleges, four-year colleges, tertiary vocational schools, universities, and other postsecondary educational institutions.

### **Types of programs.**

International service by students takes several forms (Stanton, 1987). Furco (1996) developed a typology illustrating a continuum of service programs by beneficiary (recipient/student) and focus (service/learning). An adapted version of Furco’s model illustrates the continuum of international service programs, which range from international volunteering to international internships and field education (1996). (See Figure 1; see also Sigmon, 1979).



**Figure 1.A Continuum of International Service Programs**

Adapted from "Service-learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education," by A. Furco, 1996, in *Expanding Boundaries: Service and Learning*, ed. B. Taylor, Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service, p. 10.

International service programs in higher education tend toward the right-hand side of the continuum, emphasizing student learning more than service to recipients. International internships and field education are usually part of a degree program (e.g., health, education, social work); student learning is the primary objective. At the other end of the continuum, volunteer service emphasizes service to recipients more than student learning. This essay refers to these as international volunteer service programs. This representation is not quite adequate because in either extreme the other party derives some benefit. For example, when students participate in international volunteering, they may derive benefits, and in international internships, service recipients may derive benefits. The question is whether the programs are set up with one or the other as a primary objective. In international service-learning programs, located in the middle of the continuum, the focus is reciprocal and aims for "connective" learning and growth by both (Parker & Dautoff, 2007, p. 41).

Most research on international service by students focuses on the student learning side of the continuum, including service-based internships and field education. Research on international volunteering by students, such as alternative spring break programs, service while studying abroad, and the service "gap year" (in which participants take a break from school or work to perform service) have received comparatively little attention (Jones, 2004).

The focus of this essay is on international service programs of any duration that fall on the middle to left of the continuum (Figure 1). However, because the empirical evidence is relatively scarce, this essay draws from all three types of student service, including international service-learning, international internships and field placements, and international volunteering. When evidence is

lacking in these categories, the essay also turns to evidence from (non-student) international service and study abroad programs for indications of possible relationships.

### A Conceptual Model of International Service in Higher Education

Based on a review of existing evidence, and borrowing from a model of international volunteer service (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherraden, 2001; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008), this essay develops a conceptual model that identifies key categories and relationships between these categories. It covers individual factors and institutional factors that come together in the international service action and its outcomes for students, sponsoring organizations, and host communities. This is not simply an intellectual exercise; it aims to identify directions for future research that will lead to better understanding of how to optimize international service outcomes among students (see Figure 2).

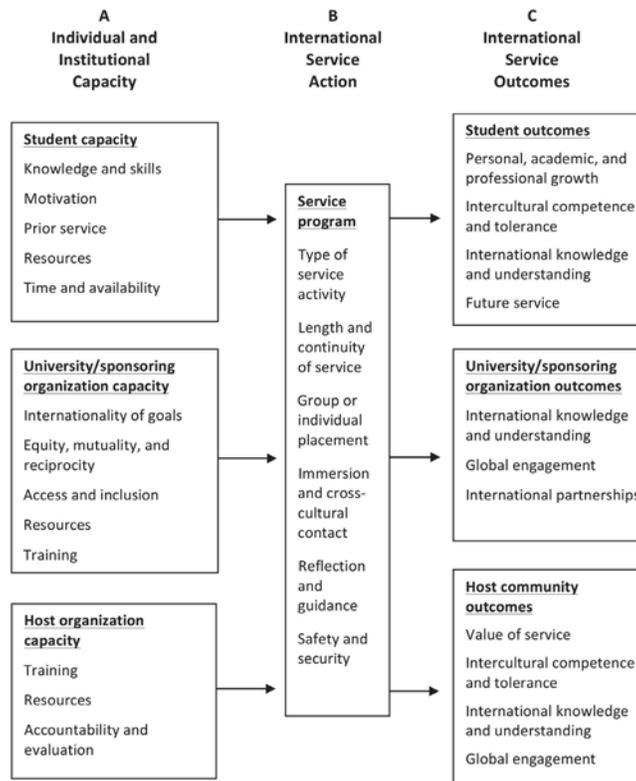


Figure 2. Conceptual Model: Impact of Students Serving Abroad

Adapted from "Effects of International Volunteering and Service: Individual and Institutional Predictors," by M. S. Sherraden, B. J. Lough, and A. M. McBride, 2008, *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 19(4), p. 397.

This review has some limitations. Occasionally, as mentioned above, when evidence is lacking from international student service programs specifically, the article cites evidence from studies of international volunteer service programs (which tend to recruit mostly young people), or from research on study abroad when it includes forms of service. Further, this article covers only research published in English.

## **Student Capacity**

A variety of individual factors affect international service outcomes, including knowledge and skills (including foreign language skills), motivation, prior service experience, resources, and time and availability. The preponderance of evidence cited here are findings from international service generally; there is little direct evidence from student programs.

### **Knowledge and skills.**

Students' knowledge and skills affect the outcomes of service, though the significance of these relationships depends on project goals. Some service projects, such as building latrines, have low skill requirements but demand enthusiasm, energy, and goodwill (*Thomas, 2001*); others require technical knowledge and expertise. In some humanitarian aid projects, for example, unskilled student volunteers may be a liability (*Dumélie, Kunze, Pankhurst, Potter, & Van Brunaene, 2006*). Foreign language skills, for example, may be crucial in some sites. Students' capacity to learn a foreign language is associated with other intercultural learning outcomes, such as intercultural communication and cultural adaptation (*Kim, 2001*).

### **Motivation.**

It is likely that individual motivations, attitudes, and expectations affect the likelihood of service and its outcomes (*Carson, 1999; Hoff, 2008*). For example, students focused on personal benefit may invest less in contributing to host communities than students whose primary motivation is helping others (*Green et al., 2008; Rehberg, 2005*).

### **Prior service experience.**

Prior service (domestic or international) may increase "learning readiness" and function as a precursor to change (*Rehberg, 2005*), although programs deliberately may select students with no experience in order to bolster their growth and learning. Knowledge and skills gained from prior international experience, perhaps

especially foreign language skills, may reduce culture shock, stress, and intense emotions (*Gran, 2006; Taylor, 1994*). Prior service may also reduce objections by family and peers, which researchers identify as barriers to service abroad (*Gaskin, 2004; Sharma & Bell, 2002*).

### **Student resources.**

Students often have to contribute financial resources (e.g., expenses, fees) in order to participate in service abroad. Although data is lacking on socioeconomic background of students engaging in international service programs, proximate measures are used from research on study abroad. Among students entering college who indicated they “were unsure about or don’t want to study abroad,” almost one-third said that cost was the primary reason for their uncertainty or lack of interest (*Green et al., 2008*). Cost is likely to play a similar role for service-learning and international service.

### **Time and availability.**

People also have different time constraints. Students who are employed, building careers, or raising families face many barriers to participation in service abroad (*McBride & Lough, 2007*), whereas retirees or unemployed youth may have more flexibility.

## **University and Sponsoring Organization Capacity**

Institutional factors also play an important role in service outcomes (*Meier, 2006*), and may in some cases compensate for individual constraints. Universities and their sponsoring organization partners set the stage for participation in international service programs. The focus here is on mid-range factors rather than macro-level factors, such as the state of the economy, which are less amenable to policy and program change. Evidence comes from diverse studies, including those focused on students.

Research on sponsoring organization partners is included because many colleges and universities collaborate with governmental, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations to offer international service programs for students (*Chisholm, 2003; Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, & Hustinx, 2010; Torres, Skillicorn, & Nelson, 2011*). International sponsoring organizations support short- and long-term international service opportunities that offer academic credit (e.g., International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership, as well as many colleges and universities) and others that do not offer credit (e.g., Amigos de Las Americas, Cross-Cultural Solutions), although students may sometimes arrange for credit through their own university (*Whalen, 2008*). Networks and consortia, such as the

Building Bridges Coalition and NAFSA: Association of International Educators in the United States, link universities with other national and international partners in order to reduce costs, facilitate coordination and cross-cultural learning, and possibly attract financial resources (*Frost & Raby, 2009*).

### **Internationality of goals.**

The priorities of colleges and universities and their organizational partners shape international service programs. Scholars suggest that international service will have the greatest impact when the sponsoring institutions infuse and integrate international service into their mission, with global partnerships as institutional priorities (*Bok, 2006; Brustein, 2009; Deardorff, 2009*). As Powell and Bratović (*2007*) write, “you get the impact you program for” (p. 42). International internships, foreign language training, international and immigrant students, faculty with international research and teaching interests, and extracurricular activities of a global nature will help prepare students for service abroad (*Brustein, 2009, p. 250; Frost & Raby, 2009*).

Effectiveness of international service programs also may be higher when campus leadership, as well as faculty members and staff members across all units on campus, is part of the vision, and where these parties “perceive internationalization as *adding value* to what they do” (*Brustein, 2009, p. 250*). Engaged faculty may be a critical component of successful international service programs (*Kiely, 2004; Peterson, 2002*). Unfortunately, the academy often does not provide strong incentives or rewards to faculty members who organize and implement international service placements (*Nolan, 2009*).

### **Equity, reciprocity, and mutuality.**

Although mission and goals are key factors in shaping international service programs, considerable research from international service-learning studies indicates the importance of joint decision making. When host communities and organizations have a genuine voice and role in program evolution, benefits are more likely to accrue to host communities (*Camacho, 2004; McCabe, 2004; Simonelli, Earle, & Story, 2004; Tilley-Lubbs, 2009*). Shared risk and ownership, personal engagement in service, and equitable exchange lead to service programs that address genuine need (*Beilke, 2005; Porter & Monard, 2001*). Although true partnerships take time, negotiation, and nurturing (*Cuban & Anderson, 2007*), true partnerships among sponsoring organizations, students, and hosts may allow for “greater individual understanding of various life experiences

as well as alteration of rigid social systems over time” (Henry & Breyfogle, 2006, p. 34).

Reciprocity may contribute to project success; further, it teaches students how to work “with” rather than work “for” communities (Crabtree, 1998, 2008; Pusch & Merrill, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Reciprocal service provides “a learning experience that addresses power inequities between student and served” (Camacho, 2004, p. 31), which may contribute to student learning. One reason for this may be that direct personal contact within reciprocal relationships tends to reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

### **Access and inclusion.**

A variety of program factors, such as cost, information, procedures, program eligibility, and lack of social protections, may explain why disadvantaged students are less likely to participate in international service (Gaskin, 2004; Gran, 2006; Jones, 2004), although few international service-learning studies have addressed this topic. The considerable cost of international service acts as a key barrier to serving abroad (Currier, Lucas, & Arnault, 2009). Relatively little financial aid is available, and it rarely covers the full cost (Frost & Raby, 2009). Health coverage may also be an issue for some students (Ludlam & Hirschhoff, 2007). Remuneration or compensation, in the form of stipends, academic credit, recognition, or other incentives, may generate a more diverse participant pool (Moskwiak, 2006). A study of community college students finds many are unaware of existing international service opportunities, suggesting that more information may generate more diverse participation (Frost & Raby, 2009). Moreover, participant diversity may also affect service outcomes: Research suggests that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may benefit more and may offer more to host communities (Schroer, 2003; Sharma & Bell, 2002).

### **Institutional resources.**

The ability to engage students in international service and operate effective programs depends on resource levels, although studies that document this connection are lacking. Generally, financially constrained institutions have fewer resources to invest in international service compared to well-endowed universities with wealthy donors. Resource levels have many implications, including duration of service abroad. Short-term programs constitute the vast majority (90%) of community college international service programs (Frost & Raby, 2009).

### **Training.**

Training may affect outcomes for students, host communities, and sponsoring institutions, according to several international service-learning studies (*Lattanzi & Pechak, 2011; Paige, 1993; Stachowski & Visconti, 1997*). Curricular content may include development theory, country history and context, cultural competency, language training, and discipline-specific training relevant to the country and place where service occurs. The extent and intensity of training ranges from superficial web-based tutorials or airport-based pre-departure preparation to intensive semester-long courses and experiential learning.

Training may take place prior to, during, or after service. Studies across different types of international service programs find that pre-departure training is linked to acquisition of knowledge, intercultural awareness, and language (*Dolby, 2004; Martin, 1989; Simonelli et al., 2004; Thomlison, 1991*). Qualitative research on a study abroad program finds that undergraduate students who engage in “honest self-reflection” about their assumptions and goals prior to departure develop a more “sensitive worldview rather than brazen interest in consumerism and personal success” (*Zemach-Bersin, 2009, p. 318*).

### **Host Organization Capacity**

Much less research across all types of international service focuses on the importance of host organization capacity, and the studies that exist tend to focus on training, resources, and evaluation and accountability. Other factors, such as the organization’s prior experience hosting international volunteers, are likely to make a difference, but the field lacks evidence.

### **Training and orientation.**

The degree to which host communities are prepared for student placements is likely to have a significant effect on the success of the international service program (*Crabtree, 2008*). Nonetheless, programs tend to focus on preparing students for experience abroad rather than preparing communities for an influx of students, whose attitudes and behaviors may differ from those of community residents (*Graham, MazemboMavungu, & Perold, 2011; Schroeder, Wood, Galiardi, & Koehn, 2009*). In a study assessing host community preparedness, host community representatives identify several factors that maximize community benefits, including adequate staff support, awareness of volunteer limitations, and a

strong connection between community members and the local organization (Irie, Daniel, Cheplick, & Philips, 2010). Tryon et al. (2008) find that short-term service-learning placements in 68 community organizations had limited success in part because host staff members were not prepared to train and supervise students. The implications are important. Increased understanding of cultural differences on the part of community members as well as students could mitigate potential disagreements among all parties (Lough, McBride, Sherraden, & O'Hara, 2011).

### **Resources.**

Although host communities do not usually bear the full costs of volunteer service, they often assume at least some of the costs associated with project monitoring and supervision, as well as orientation, language training, housing, healthcare, transportation, and other support (*Structure of Operational Support*, 1999; Tryon et al., 2008). Organizations vary in their capacity to respond (Graham et al., 2011), and many rely on local residents and other local private and public organizations to help absorb the costs. In one study of short-term volunteering, host organization staff talked during in-depth interviews about the time it takes to facilitate and integrate the volunteers in the organization (Lough et al., 2011).

### **Accountability and evaluation.**

Positive outcomes are more likely when international service programs are meaningful and responsive to both students and community residents (Dharamsi et al., 2010; Irie et al., 2010; Lough, 2011). Communities typically exercise relatively little control over the service itself. For example, they frequently have no role in allocating resources and selecting students for service; in some cases, they may not be involved in selecting the project (Graham et al., 2011; Lough et al., 2011). Lack of "voice" in service design and evaluation by communities may contribute to service models that are paternalistic or even imperialistic (Grusky, 2000; Roberts, 2004; Wehbi, 2009), and are often associated with programs originating in the global North (Engel, 2006; Illich, 1990; Simpson, 2004). In contrast, with greater accountability, students do not act as managers and experts, but as learners and team members, thereby encouraging mutual learning and reciprocity, which may minimize paternalism and reduce competition (Rockcliffe, 2005).

## International Service Action

Individual and institutional factors come together to help shape international service action—what volunteers do in a service placement. This includes characteristics of the service activity, type of reflection, duration, level of continuity, type of placement (group or individual), and level of immersion and cross-cultural contact.

### Type of service activity.

Although no comprehensive assessments of international service-learning activities have been conducted, studies of international service overall suggest that students are engaged in a broad range of activities. For instance, a United Kingdom study of “gap-year” programs, in which students take a break of months or years from formal education or work (Jones, 2004), suggests that the most common types of activities performed by participants are community-based work (37%), teaching (15%), and conservation and environment (15%). Another study of 103 international service programs indicates that the main activities (not mutually exclusive) are educational services (85%), human and social services (80%), community development (75%), and environmental protection (73%; McBride, Benítez, & Sherraden, 2003). In a nationally representative survey, U.S. volunteers serving abroad report the following activities: general labor (33%), mentoring youth (29%), providing medical or protective services (23%), or teaching (22%; Lough, 2010).

### Duration and continuity.

Programs may be short term (less than an academic term), medium term (an academic term), or long term (an academic year or more), and also vary by number of hours spent in service (Bingle & Tonkin, 2004). Some studies find an association between program duration and intercultural skills, intercultural development, and cross-cultural competence (Hoff, 2008; Reiman, Sprinthall, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1997) and study abroad programs (Akande & Slawson, 2000; Dwyer, 2004; Engle & Engle, 2003; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004; Zorn, 1996). Other studies find positive outcomes even among short programs (Jones, 2005; Tammy, 2005). One academic semester may be adequate for achieving measurable progress in intercultural competence, according to one study (Myers-Lipton, 1996), and even shorter term programs of a few weeks may have positive effects on personal and professional growth (Haloburdo & Thompson, 1998; Walsh & DeJoseph, 2003) and

cultural sensitivity (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006). Medina-López-Portillo (2004) finds little difference in intercultural sensitivity of students as the result of a short-term (7-week) or medium-term (16-week) program in Mexico.

The benefits of short-term programs to host organizations and communities are less clear. Long-term international service placements (not specifically students) have more community development potential (White & Cliffe, 2000) because they have greater potential for exchange of technical skills, knowledge, and experience (Devereux, 2006; Dumélie et al., 2006), and volunteers have more time to learn about and become trusted by community members. One study finds that some shortcomings of short-term placements may be overcome by carefully coordinated placements that ensure continuity of service over time (Wood, Banks, Galiardi, Koehn, & Schroeder, 2011).

### **Group or individual placements.**

Individual versus group placements also may lead to different outcomes. Individual placements may encourage more intense student-host interaction, but require more resources. Group placements offer increased economies of scale that may result in more hours of service. However, group placements may inhibit development of relationships with local hosts and reduce cultural immersion, meaningful contact, and opportunity for students to learn language and customs (Citron, 2002; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008; Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, & McBride, 2006). This may be a significant outcome if cultural immersion leads to greater effectiveness. In other words, students in a group placement may be able to make noteworthy tangible contributions (e.g., build a school or house), but students and local residents may gain less in cross-cultural understanding (Amir & Garti, 1977).

### **Immersion and cross-cultural contact.**

Cross-cultural contact, especially prolonged immersion, including living, working, or studying abroad with local people, is associated with increases in intercultural competence and cross-cultural skills (Battersby, 2002; Engle & Engle, 2003). Immersion experiences in which individuals report experiencing “culture shock” or “cultural disequilibrium” may be especially influential because they signal challenges to previous beliefs and lead to change (Chang, Chen, Huang, & Yuan, 2011; Taylor, 1994; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). The degree of cultural disequilibrium that

students experience depends partly on the intensity of contact with a different culture (Mezirow, 2000).

Service activities can be structured to increase opportunities for cross-cultural contact. Home stays, multi-national groups, and students paired with local workers may increase cross-cultural contact in service abroad. “Embeddedness” (Bringle & Tonkin, 2004) allows for immersion that anthropologists say is necessary for deeper understanding of another culture (Geertz, 1983). This may encourage heightened awareness of cultural norms and community needs among students, improve language development, and provide psychological support to local residents in high-conflict or oppressed areas (Wilkinson, 1998). Immersion may lead to “genuine, fair and respectful reciprocal relations” that form the foundation for local development (Devereux, 2006, p. 18), although in some situations, immersion goals may be moderated by safety considerations.

### **Reflection.**

Reflection is a core feature of service-learning in particular, may occur during and after service (Cushner, 2009; Kiely, 2004; Peterson, 2002), and may be organized by community members, professors, local staff, mentors, and peers (Frost & Raby, 2009, p. 181). Reflection contributes to psychological growth and development of critical thinking skills (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Hoff, 2008; Reiman et al., 1997). Making the connection between individual and contextual factors helps students understand and engage in a transformative learning process (Kiely, 2005); it also helps them gain understanding of themselves and their position in society, and form connections to and relations with the host community (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000).

Consistent with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000), strong emotions encourage critical reflection (Taylor, 1994). When international service leads to cultural disequilibrium accompanied by guided reflection, “culture shock” may turn into cultural learning (Bennett, 2008). For example, international volunteers report that they often experience a sense of guilt at their first encounter with extreme poverty, which, when they are able to reflect on it, leads to constructive “life altering” and “transforming experiences” (Abram, Slosar, & Walls, 2005; see also Camacho, 2004) and may increase intercultural understanding and decrease prejudice (Reiman et al., 1997). Moreover, studies assert that reflection assists with cultural adaptation and sensitivity (Bacon, 2002; Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Williams, 2005).

### **Safety and security.**

Safety and security matter to students and their families (Ludlam & Hirschhoff, 2007). Risk management plans by international service programs and host communities can affect service outcomes (Irie et al., 2010). In addition to considering the safety and security of students, Pechak and Thompson (2009) suggest that risk management measures should also be applied to host communities in order to avoid unintended harm to host organization partners and their constituents.

### **Student Outcomes**

Outcomes for students from service abroad include personal and professional growth, cross-cultural and international skills, intercultural sensitivity and tolerance, international understanding and global vision, and increased future service at home and abroad.

### **Personal, academic, and professional growth.**

Many studies document personal growth and transformation (Chang et al., 2011; Kiely, 2004, 2011; Pyle, 1981), as well as knowledge and skills from study and service abroad. Nursing students, for example, who served abroad in acute medical and community care displayed higher cognitive growth than non-participating students in a quasi-experimental study (Zorn, Ponick, & Peck, 1995). In one quasi-experimental study, service-learning students gained autonomy, interdependence, and direction for future life plans compared to students who had signed up for service-learning but dropped out due to other commitments (Pyle, 1981). Students studying abroad also report greater confidence about language skills compared to those remaining on campus (Cubillos, Chieffo, & Fan, 2008). Student teachers on Navajo reservations and in international placements implemented the cultural values they had observed to create lessons that related to their students' ethics, beliefs, and experiences (Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003). In contrast, some research suggests that significant time away from the classroom in service may negatively affect student learning (Hironimus-Wendt & Lovell-Troy, 1999), although more research is needed.

Skills gained in international service may improve employability and future job success, according to some studies (Cook & Jackson, 2006; Institute for Volunteering Research, 2004). Career directions also may change as a result of international service. Service-learning alumni reported that they redefined their ideas about helping others as a result of their participation (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). In addition to gaining clinical skills, medical

students serving abroad are more inclined to work in public health or primary and community healthcare for underserved populations (Gupta, Wells, Horwitz, Bia, & Barry, 1999; Haq et al., 2000). Medical students who completed an international elective abroad became more interested in working with underserved multicultural populations in their home communities, and were more likely to care for immigrant patients and those on public assistance (Godkin & Savageau, 2003; Gupta et al., 1999).

### **Intercultural competence and tolerance.**

Students with experience in other countries learn how to live in a variety of local and international contexts (Nussbaum, 1997). Outcomes include changes in attitude, such as more intercultural sensitivity and an increase in students' appreciation for others' points of view (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). Program alumni in another international service-learning program developed empathy for people from other countries (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004).

One of the ways that students may become sensitized to differences is through the experience of being a minority (Camacho, 2004; Chang et al., 2011; Merryfield, 2000). For instance, a study of 80 teacher educators finds that White teachers—who gained “first-hand understandings of what it means to be marginalized, to be a victim of stereotypes and prejudice, and how this might affect people”—were significantly more likely to report impact of living abroad than teachers of color who had experienced marginalization previously at home (Cushner, 2009, p. 165). Nonetheless, studies on international service programs are lacking. White students working with migrant workers in Mexico experienced feelings of otherness and feeling “like a minority,” while Chicano and Hispanic students seemed to relate more to the workers' struggles (Camacho, 2004, p. 38). Students also explored their feelings of privilege and sought to understand the workers' situations through an empathic lens.

Reciprocity and guided reflection may be critical to positive gains in intercultural competence (Lough, 2011); when these factors are absent, the service experience actually may “lock in prejudices and ethnocentric views” (Savicki, 2008, p. 76). This may lead to decreased tolerance, lack of cross-cultural understanding, and an inaccurate grasp of the causes and consequences of global poverty (Grusky, 2000; Simpson, 2004).

### **International knowledge and understanding.**

Firsthand experiences increase students' understanding of conditions in other parts of the world and how countries interrelate, and expand their worldview. For example, in a quasi-experimental study, students in international service-learning displayed greater increases in international understanding than other students, including a group that was engaged in local community service (*Myers-Lipton, 1996*). International service is associated with increased global-mindedness and cultural, social, political, and economic awareness (*McBride, Lough, & Sherraden, 2012*), as well as a greater understanding of complex global relationships (*DeDee & Stewart, 2003*).

Students in study abroad programs show greater awareness of global realities, interconnectedness, and understanding of their privileges (*Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004*). An early pre-post-test study (*Marion, 1974*) finds that students became more realistic yet less positive about the host country as a result of study abroad, although outcomes varied by number of countries visited, time spent in residents' homes, language skills, and views prior to the program.

Change in worldview may present challenges when students return home. Kiely (*2004, p. 16*) suggests that students struggle with balancing their "emerging global consciousness" with mainstream norms and the opinions of loved ones. Although there is little research on re-entry, many researchers and practitioners advocate for more attention to the process.

### **Future service.**

International service tends to motivate students to continue to engage in volunteer service when they return home. For instance, social work students engaged in service-learning demonstrated stronger beliefs in their ability and responsibility to make a difference in the world (*Ericson, 2011*). Qualitative research on short-term service-learning reveals deeper understanding of societal issues and an enhanced desire to work for social change among students (*Monard-Weissman, 2003*). Even short "alternative spring break" experiences lead to an expressed desire to give back after returning home (*Porter & Monard, 2001*).

### **University/Sponsoring Organization Outcomes**

In addition to the benefits to students who serve abroad, international service placements may also affect the sponsoring

institution or university, although, overall, there is little research evidence (*Annette, 2003*).

### **Interest in international issues.**

Universities where large numbers of students serve abroad may increase overall interest in international issues on campus, and possibly have a multiplier effect even among non-participating students. There is some evidence that peers of international service-learners may develop broader vision. In one study, for example, peers of students who served abroad developed greater interest in service-related activities, and more knowledge of social and cultural issues (*Johnson, 2009*).

### **Global engagement.**

Research on international volunteer sponsoring organizations suggests an expanded international profile and capacity to work effectively cross-nationally and globally (*Machin, 2008; Sherraden & Benítez, 2003*). The same might be true for universities, placing them in an improved position for bilateral and multilateral collaboration, and contributing to institutional capacity to build global competence and respond to pressing global issues. However, to date there is little empirical data to support these claims.

### **International partnerships.**

As universities engage with partners in host countries, they gain relationships that, over time, may expand the scope of faculty research activities, provide more diverse academic programs, expand educational options that appeal to students, and stimulate the “cross-fertilization of ideas” and research (*Chisholm, 2003, p. 260; see also Lin, 2010*).

## **Host Community Outcomes**

The starting point for university-based international service programs is student learning, but there is increasing recognition that outcomes for host communities are equally important (*Crabtree, 2008; Tonkin, 2011*). Unfortunately, there is less research on outcomes for host communities than outcomes for students (*Bringle & Tonkin, 2004; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004*).

A handful of studies on international service by students and others suggest possible outcomes for host communities. For several reasons, existing research has not paid enough attention to results for host communities (*Irie et al., 2010*). Evaluating host community

outcomes is complex. Host organizations may avoid researchers' questions or feel compelled to respond favorably for fear of losing assistance associated with students in service. In a study aimed at assessing the effects of alternative spring break programs on host communities, for example, Schroeder and colleagues (2009) discovered that respondents focused on volunteer in-kind and financial contributions, and evaded questions about negative effects.

### **Tangible resources.**

International service by students provides host communities with human capital, and sometimes with monetary and other resources. In one study, host organization staff members claimed that international volunteers help fill gaps in staffing and bring additional financial and in-kind resources (*Keino, Torrie, Hausafus, & Trost, 2010*). In a study of short-term domestic and international service-learning, students provided financial and in-kind resources that would not otherwise be available to the community (*Irie et al., 2010*).

Although they make tangible contributions, international service programs often require resources in time and money from host communities (*Graham et al., 2011; Grusky, 2000; Tryon et al., 2008*). Comparing the cost of sending service-learning students to the estimated value to the community, Aaron Dorfman (2010) asks whether it is worth it. Using "back-of-the-envelope math," Dorfman calculates that students participating in an alternative spring break spend about 25 hours engaged in manual labor, worth approximately \$5 to \$6 per hour: "That's something like \$150 worth of labor (assuming a Jewish college student from the University of Michigan or Yeshiva University can work as productively as an indigenous peasant farmer—a dubious proposition at best)" (2010), compared to average direct costs of around \$1,800.

### **Capacity building.**

Interviews with 30 staff members in organizations that host short-term international volunteers indicate that participants build organizational capacity by supplying "extra hands," providing technical and professional skills, contributing tangible resources, and enhancing intercultural understanding (*Lough et al., 2011*). International volunteers report helping with service delivery, management, planning, and marketing as well as attracting funding, networks of support, and opportunities for collaboration (*Jester & Thyer, 2007; McGehee & Santos, 2005*).

### **Intercultural competence, tolerance, international knowledge, and global engagement.**

Research on international service suggests that host organizations and community members may gain intercultural competence, international knowledge, and global awareness (Powell & Bratović, 2007; Sherraden & Benítez, 2003). Positive interaction among people from different countries and cultures may add to residents' intercultural knowledge and skills, and increase tolerance (Fantini, 2007). Conversely, intercultural tensions could be exacerbated when programs are poorly run and are not monitored, leading to events such as students committing indiscretions or crimes. International service programs may also introduce to the community a positive model of global civic engagement, expand international social networks, and leverage and attract resources and recognition from international donors and others (Comhlámh, 2007; Sherraden et al., 2008). However, they also could add to emigration, with potential negative and positive effects (e.g., remittances, family separation, brain drain). Little research has addressed the association between emigration and international service.

### **Summary and Implications**

International service programs in higher education include volunteer programs, service-learning, and professional internships and field education. Colleges and universities sponsor international service alone or jointly in consortiums, or they may contract other nonprofit and for-profit entities to facilitate international service placements. International service is receiving growing attention for its potential contributions to student learning, internationalization of higher education, and host community well-being (McBride & Mlyn, 2011; Van Danen, 2001).

Overall, however, the state of knowledge about international student service is limited (Bingle, Hatcher, & Williams, 2011; Kiely & Hartman, 2011). Put simply, researchers do not have comprehensive data on numbers of programs and participants, or on types of service, such as performing internships and field placements, service-learning, and service only (e.g., alternative spring break, summer service). Moreover, data are not available that capture finer distinctions, such as global figures on variation in service duration, service that receives academic credit, destinations, project types, and other features of service programs.

Existing research points to a range of factors that shape international service action and service outcomes (see Figure 2),

although this review of the evidence suggests that much remains to be learned. Other factors may be important as well, but are not included because this model includes only those factors cited in the research literature on international service.

Individual and institutional capacity shape service action. Studies of international service indicate that student capacity to participate in service is likely to be important, although more research is needed specifically on students in service. University and sending organization capacity to sponsor, implement, and evaluate programs suggests that reciprocity, development of mutually agreed-upon goals and structure, and training for service help shape the nature of service action. However, studies are lacking on student access and inclusion and resource levels. Existing studies suggest that host communities often are unprepared to make optimal use of students in international service, although more research is needed.

Little is known about the nature of international service action (types and extent) by students across the globe. However, studies of service by students find that duration of service and cultural immersion are likely to make a difference in certain kinds of outcomes, such as language acquisition and cross-cultural learning. Careful and ongoing reflection on the service experience appears to make a difference in ensuring personal growth for students, and may make students more sensitive to the host community, although low-resource institutions, such as community colleges, are often unable to afford the expense (*Frost & Raby, 2009*). Overall, evidence is lacking about effects of group versus individual placements and safety and security on service outcomes.

Regarding service outcomes, evidence is growing. Research from international service, international service-learning, and international internship programs suggests that students gain both personally and professionally. Students develop cross-cultural skills, sensitivity, and tolerance toward others. They gain more international understanding and develop a more inclusive global vision. Many return to their country of origin with a desire to continue in service at home and abroad. There are also some potentially negative outcomes, including threats to personal safety, disillusionment, cultural misunderstandings, and difficulties re-engaging at home at the end of service. However, the studies reviewed suggest a need for more long-term research on long-term effects, such as career impact.

The small amount of evidence regarding the effects of student service on university life, peers, sponsoring organizations, and host communities is only suggestive. Although a student body with experience abroad is likely to contribute to an enriched campus environment and build connections overseas, research evidence is lacking. Regarding host communities, although there is evidence that students bring useful human capital (if only “extra hands”) and contribute to building intercultural relations, international understanding, and global engagement, it is also possible that unprepared students may be a drain on community resources (*Lough et al., 2011*).

At this stage, research studies should undertake four key tasks. One is to create clear definitions of types of international service by students, and use these to develop tracking systems to measure international service activities by students and universities. We need a better idea of the numbers of students and activities undertaken in service abroad. Although existing research points to the elements of international service discussed in this article, we need clearer concepts and key propositions. Classifications of service that distinguish types of service should be clearer. (Even within study abroad programs, there is great variation. For example, some study abroad programs include service, such as internships or volunteer requirements, and cross-cultural interaction, such as students sharing housing with local students, whereas other study abroad programs have no service requirement and U.S. students live in separate quarters.) Studies rarely measure how different service activities, including type of service, duration, and support, affect outcomes. Better evidence is needed to draw firmer conclusions about how to design international service projects in ways that maximize positive benefits for students, universities and sponsoring organizations, and host communities. Although definitions lack precision and more data are needed to capture the exact scope and volume of international service programs in higher education, efforts are under way to track these activities with greater accuracy (*McBride & Mlyn, 2011*).

Second, the field should undertake rigorous qualitative and quantitative studies. Qualitative studies, which identify and explore important variables across dimensions, can refine the conceptual model presented in this article. The field also should move to experimental and quasi-experimental studies that can help determine causation. Most studies cited in this article reflect findings from case studies and small pre-post studies. To permit claims about impacts, measures should be administered longitudinally with rigorous research designs. Experiments can concretely

demonstrate how the service experience affects students and how these effects can be sustained over time. To accomplish this, researchers can utilize a quasi-experimental methodology to match the target of change (student or university) with a similar target that does not engage in service, but is comparable on key measures.

In addition, in order to build a comparative knowledge base, it is important that research utilize standardized, valid, and reliable measurement tools. (Qualitative research can contribute to development of these tools.) When these tools are administered across diverse programs that differ on key variables (e.g., reciprocity, access, duration, immersion, reflection), findings can inform effective practices. Comparative research is needed to link variations in institutional practices to variations in outcomes.

Third, cost-benefit studies should examine the relative costs and benefits, especially for students and host communities. Some studies estimate the cost of sending and maintaining volunteers in placements (*Laleman et al., 2007*), the value of hours spent volunteering (*Hudson Institute, 2007; Lough, McBride, & Sherraden 2007*), and the value of incremental increases in social capital to host communities (*Mayer, 2003*), but researchers have not combined cost-benefit analysis with impact analysis to more closely estimate the total value and utility of international service compared to other development strategies.

## Conclusion

International service by students offers many potential benefits for participants, sponsoring institutions, and host communities. International borders have a different meaning for young people today than they did for prior generations. Facilitating experience abroad for youth from all sectors of society, especially in service that encourages deeper understanding of other cultures, may open doors to creative ways of solving global problems. A new generation of young people, along with their partners in host communities, could emerge better prepared to discover and employ productive approaches to solving pressing problems and contributing to global equality, social well-being, and peace.

However, in order to accomplish these lofty goals, we must have a far more sophisticated understanding of service abroad. With few exceptions, evidence is suggestive rather than definitive. More knowledge is needed about current efforts and the scope of international service by students and the service models employed by colleges and universities. Greater conceptual clarity and better

ways of measuring tangible and intangible benefits that accrue to participants and contributors in service abroad programs are also required. Finally, research is needed to understand how and when different models of service—including international and domestic service—lead to desired outcomes such as global competence, intercultural understanding, and tangible benefits for students, sponsoring institutions, and host communities. With increasing numbers of young people engaged in service abroad and large sums of money invested in these experiences, it is important to comprehend fully the outcomes.

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