

DISSERTATION

EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AS A RESULT OF PARTICIPATION
IN AN INTERNATIONAL SERVICE IMMERSION TRIP

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall 2014

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis study was to explore the experience of returning home to the United States after completing an international service immersion trip, and the feelings and emotions undergraduate students might experience as a result of international service immersion trips. Additionally, the study explored the experiences of undergraduate students after completing a short term (one week) international service immersion trip to better understand the phenomena related to these experiences and the learning experiences of undergraduate students who participate in international services immersion trips. The ten participants in this study shared powerful and rich stories of their experiences during their time on the ground in Jamaica, as well as after they returned home. Each participant shared overwhelming enthusiasm for the experience in his own way. Additionally, the study explored the experience of returning home to the United States after completing an international service immersion trip, and the feelings and emotions undergraduate students experienced as a result of international service immersion. Overall themes that emerged were Exploring Poverty, Exploring Privilege, Global Citizenship, Power of Education, Helping vs. Serving, and Fraternity Connections.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have had the opportunity to work for three individuals who supported and encouraged me along the way. Mark Koepsell helped me to get started, Greg Roberts encouraged me during an especially busy time, and Cindi Love has seen me through to completion. I have had some great coworkers—especially Lea Hanson and Mike McRee for cheering me on and sharing their secrets. I am grateful to the staffs of AFLV, Synergos AMC, and ACPA.

Linda Kuk has been a champion from the first time I met her, before I even applied to the program. I appreciate your guidance, support, and tough love. I'm not sure I would have made it this far with any other advisor. Dave McKelfresh, Sharon Anderson, and Nancy Banman have been an excellent committee support, each providing their own unique encouragement and feedback that together comprised the perfect committee.

My parents have been supporters of education and lifelong learning for as long as I can remember. My siblings Joe, Bridget, David, Katie, Jeff, and Sammie have each provided their own brand of encouragement or feigned interest along the way. George, Pat, and Kelley, thank you for enthusiastically supporting my writing process! Too many friends have provided support, encouragement, and love along the way. I am especially grateful to Mike and Catie. Two special friends provided encouragement and strength as well as fueled my determination on this journey. Joe and Jenny, I look forward to the day when we meet again. Kevin entered this journey at a pivotal time. Your calm gentle assurance (and willingness to work around crazy writing schedules) helped me to manage the stress and uncertainty of the final year. Finally, my cohort. I have so enjoyed our journey together over the past four years and I look forward to many continued encounters as we move into this next phase in our careers.

DEDICATION

“Little” Tricia and Maggie, when I began this journey you were just in preschool – and Mag was still in diapers. Now you are beautiful young women taking elementary school by storm. I hope that my work and perseverance will serve as an inspiration for you as you each continue on your own educational journey. Thank you for opening my eyes to a whole new world. I love you!

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background and Context of the Problem

International service immersion experiences are becoming increasingly popular as an avenue for college students to explore other cultures, practice language skills, and demonstrate concern for the global community through hands on service. In a world that is becoming more global each day, undergraduate students are looking for opportunities to immerse themselves in other cultures as part of their learning experience during college. “The goals for linking international travel, education, and community service include increasing participants’ global awareness and development of humane values, building intercultural understanding and communication, and enhancing civic mindedness and leadership skills” (Crabtree, 2008, p. 18). As these programs increase in popularity and style, it is important to study the experiences undergraduate students have as a result of participation, both short term and long term (Astin & Sax, 1998; Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, Ireland, Niehaus, & Skendall, 2012; Kiely, 2005; Miller and Gonzalez, 2009).

Donnelly-Smith (2009) reported, “Short-term study abroad experiences – those in which students are engaged for fewer than eight weeks- are the most common type of undergraduate study abroad in the United States” (p. 12). In other words, short term study abroad experiences like service immersion trips are now more common than a more traditional semester abroad program for undergraduate students. In addition to academic institutions, many other academically connected organizations are now planning and hosting international service immersion experiences for undergraduate students. These include inter/national fraternities and sororities and other membership based organizations.

To date, little research has been done to study the outcomes of these international service immersion experiences for students, both short term and over a longer period of time once they have left the college environment and are working and living in community. There are many areas of research to explore including pre-immersion trip preparation, curriculum and reflection opportunities during the course of the immersion experience, experiences of students during the trip, experience after returning home, experience of trip leaders and facilitators, and the experience of those in the country of service who interact with the trip participants during their time on the ground. Plante, Lackey, and Hwang (2009) discussed the state of research on service immersion, identifying that there is little research currently available related to the development of students as a result of specifically participating in service immersion. Plante et al. (2009) noted in their work that broader research on participation in service learning experiences enhances future civic engagement for students as well as their likelihood to volunteer and the development of personal moral ethics.

Jones and Abes (2004) highlighted the renewed emphasis in higher education on “cultivating citizenship and social responsibility” (p. 149) as a responsibility of student affairs practitioners and higher education in general. The present study explored the ways in which students engaged with and experienced international service immersion as well as the learning experiences of the student participants and the ways in which undergraduate student participants made meaning of their experience upon returning home to the United States. Results will help inform practice for student affairs practitioners, and better enable practitioners to cultivate social responsibility, as Jones and Abes suggested.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis study was to explore the experience of returning home to the United States after completing an international service immersion trip, and the feelings and emotions undergraduate students might experience as a result of international service immersion. Additionally, the study explored the experiences of undergraduate students after completing a short term (one week) international service immersion trip to better understand the phenomena related to these experiences and the learning experiences of undergraduate students who participate in international services immersion.

Research Questions

In an interpretive phenomenological analysis, primary research questions focus on participant understanding of their experiences. Questions are designed to explore rather than explain, reflect process, rather than outcome, and explore meaning, rather than concrete cause (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). For this study, the overarching research question was: What were the experiences of undergraduate students upon their return from an international service immersion trip?

Questions:

- What are the experiences of undergraduate students as they leave the country of service at the conclusion of their international service immersion trip?
- How did the participants experience the curriculum of the service immersion experience in relationship to their personal experience of returning home?
- How do the planned daily curriculum and reflection opportunities included in an international service immersion trip influence the experience of returning home for undergraduate students?

- What are the experiences of undergraduate students during their first month back in the United States following an international service immersion trip?
- How do undergraduate students make meaning of the international service immersion experience in the months following their trip?

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions of terms are provided:

Civic engagement: is defined as the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to promote the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes (Ehrlich, 2000).

Community engagement: is defined as nonpolitical, and focuses on local involvement and participation through engaging in local community activities such as volunteering and participating in local groups, clubs, and organizations (McBride, Lough, & Sherraden, 2012).

Global awareness: is defined by four categories including intercultural awareness, personal growth and development, awareness of global interdependence, and functional knowledge of world geography and language (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004).

International service immersion: is defined as combining academic instruction or curriculum and reflection and community-based service in an international context (Crabtree, 2008)

Self-authorship: is defined as the ability to collect, interpret and analyze information and reflect on one's own beliefs in order to form judgments (Magolda, B. MB, 1998).

Service-learning: is defined as a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development (Jacoby, 1996).

Socially responsible leadership: is defined by the social change model of leadership development, which “approaches leadership as a purposeful, collaborative, values-based process that results in positive social change” (Cilente, 2009).

Social Change Model of Leadership: is defined as a values-based process. The model is rooted in commitment to core human values such as self-knowledge, service, and collaboration. (Cilente, 2009).

Short term service immersion programs: is defined as a purposefully designed program generally one week in nature, which includes components of community service and cultural immersion opportunities (Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, Ireland, Niehaus, & Skendall, 2012).

Delimitations

This study included undergraduate male students who were members of an international fraternity and voluntarily elected to participate in the organization’s international service immersion program which consists of a week-long trip to Jamaica. The participants come from academic institutions across the United States, and all levels of undergraduate study – freshman through senior. For the purposes of this study, only individuals who participated in their first international service immersion experience were invited to interview. The study focused on participants in the May and June 2014 trips.

Potential Limitations

The study was limited to undergraduate male students from various college and universities around the country who participated in a short term service immersion trip to Jamaica through their international fraternity. The study only focused on the experiences these students had during their departure from Jamaica and their return to the United States from their international service immersion experience. The study was limited by these factors and therefore

cannot be generalizable to other fraternal organizations or to other types of international service immersion experiences. Additionally, the focus of the trip is to only one country in the Caribbean. While other pieces of the international service immersion experience are explored through participant interviews and conversations as a means to discovering the end result, these aspects are not the focus of the study.

Significance of the Study

International service immersion trips have become part of the fabric of many undergraduate experiences and are now being conducted by both academic institutions and academically related organizations. Research about the variety of international service immersion experiences and the experiences of students as they move through these important co-curricular experiences is lacking. The study will contribute to the body of literature on international service immersion experiences. Although the results from the study are not generalizable, they hopefully will provide insights into the experiences of international service immersion participants, and help us to understand their process of returning home and making meaning of the international service immersion experience. The study will help inform practitioners as they design and build international service immersion experiences for undergraduate students. Additionally, it will help guide scholar-practitioners as they look for additional areas to research and explore related to the experiences of international service immersion. As our students prepare to enter a more global society, practitioners must prepare and equip themselves to aid students with this important transition.

Researcher's Perspective

International service immersion experiences have been an important part of my life since my high school years. I participated in my first international service immersion trip to central

Mexico during my junior year of high school. As a college student, I participated in two international service immersion experiences. And as a professional, I've created both domestic and international service immersion programs at one academic institution and one academically-related organization, and supported a growing international service immersion program at a second academic institution. As a participant and facilitator in many short term international service immersion experiences, I have observed the experiences of undergraduates of varying backgrounds. Through these observations, I have come to understand the unique opportunities and challenges presented through these types of short term study abroad programs. I have witnessed the power of a one week experience to provoke new and exciting thoughts and actions in students, and have also come to understand the frustrations related to short term service, and feeling like one perhaps did not do enough to help. All of the trips I have participated in and led had different levels of group and individual reflection and daily curriculum, as well as varying degrees of pre-trip preparation and post-trip processing.

I firmly believe in the power of international service immersion experiences for undergraduate students. I want to help contribute to our understanding of the experiences in order to continue to improve the experience and the process for undergraduate students to come.

Conclusion

International service immersion and short term study abroad experiences have replaced traditional semester long study abroad experiences as the most popular form of global engagement for undergraduate students. The information gathered from this study will help to inform the ways in which we prepare undergraduate students to participate in international service immersion experiences, inform trip curriculum and reflection opportunities, and provide avenues for increasing the support we provide after these participants return home.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

College students have the opportunity to develop in many ways as a result of their international service immersion experiences. They have the chance to learn about a new culture, history, and customs. They have a chance to learn new language skills – in both domestic and international locations. Opportunities to test one’s own comfort level with new things and new places present themselves every day during international service immersion experiences. The chances to work with a new group of people and depend on others for success (and in some cases, survival) are also present in many service immersion opportunities. “International immersion experiences involve intense psycho-emotional, ideological, and physiological disruptions” (Crabtree, 2008, p. 21). The current body of literature showed that students who come in to close contact and share experiences with people from another culture have reduced levels of ethnocentrism (Boyle, Nackerud, & Kilpatrick, 1999). Students are likely to leave the experience with more questions than they had when they arrived, and with a changed perspective. As Savard (2012) pointed out, “The crux of the immersion is the immersion itself, giving students an opportunity to experience the poverty and lack of resources that afflict much of the world” (p. 50). This experience provided student participants with many opportunities for learning and growth.

The follow up work once the students return from the experiences is just as important as the preparation work for the student’s long term developmental process. Boyle, Nackerud, and Kilpatrick (1999) also highlighted the increased stress which comes with cultural immersion, most significantly for students who have not previously traveled outside of the country.

Traveling to a developing country can be a particularly jarring experience if one has not ever left

their home community or state. Similarly, returning from an international experience to a home community that hasn't changed or shared the experience can be difficult for student participants.

In one of the early studies on the outcomes of service participation, Astin and Sax (1998) looked at the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data collected from 1990-1994. The researchers sent a follow up survey, the College Student Survey (CSS) to selected participants in 1995 and found that all 35 student outcome measures on the CIRP were positively impacted by participation in service. Astin and Sax concluded participation in service during the undergraduate years has a positive impact on students' academic development, civic responsibility, and life skills. To date, further research on the impact of service immersion utilizing CIRP data has not been published. In a related study, Avelos, Sax, and Astin (1993) concluded the impact of participation in service activities while in college has long term effects, and also has direct effects on the educational outcomes of students including enrollment in a graduate program.

Perhaps the most important outcome of international service immersion is the relationships students develop with those whom they are serving (DuPre, 2010). Through these relationships, students learn about themselves, and also about those with whom they are serving, in the process becoming a more global citizen. Mills, Bersamina, and Plante (2003) asserted those who participate in international service immersion gain a greater understanding of their personal identity and new insights into their own lives. Often, through interaction with locals, and most especially children, participants are able to make meaning of their experience, and understand the needs of a community far greater than their own.

Eyler and Giles (1999) hypothesized about the variety of service immersion experiences occurring, and the inability to effectively study and determine the outcomes of these experiences

in a way that can be generalized. Eyler (2000) in a later article asserted we need to refine our definition of the intellectual outcomes associated with service-immersion and to then develop appropriate measurements. Eyler laid out several questions for researchers to consider when studying service learning. In contrast, Kiely (2005) encouraged fellow researchers to broaden their focus, and instead of looking at precise methods, we should instead be looking at contextual, visceral, emotive, and affective aspects of international service immersion.

The body of research and literature related to the impact of international service immersion continues to expand. This review of literature will explore international service immersion experience models, courses, non-course based experiences, reflection components, evaluation frameworks, and dimensions of student development.

International Service Immersion Experience Models

International service immersion experiences are occurring under a variety of models. In order to better understand the experiences, it is important to have an understanding of the types of experiences that are currently being offered. As Eyler and Giles (1999) pointed out:

Unlike typical classroom learning, real-world learning tends to be more cooperative or communal than individualistic, involves using tools rather than pure thought, is accomplished by addressing genuine problems in complex settings rather than problems in isolation, and involves specific contextualized rather than abstract or general knowledge. (p. 9)

Each institution or organization has a slightly different take on a basic model that generally includes hands on service, cultural immersion, team building among the group participating in the experience, and time to interact with locals in the communities or countries being served. As Eyler and Giles (1999) highlighted, these experiences call upon student participants and faculty

or staff leaders to use different skills than they would in a typical classroom environment. Frisk and Larson (2011) reminded us that active, applied learning in the form of service immersion increases understanding for undergraduate students, and also instills in students the importance of civic action and engagement. Dupre and Goodgold (2007) asserted:

Immersion is a potent force that perturbs the status quo and facilitates self-awareness and culturally competent behaviors. To further foster development of student cultural competence, our conceptual framework needs to be expanded to reflect the multiple facets of an individual's identity and the influences on behavior change. Then, the framework needs to be empirically tested with larger samples in varied settings. (p. 133)

An exploration of the various models of international service immersion will help to develop a greater understanding of the models that need to be empirically tested.

The popularity of international service immersion experiences for those in the allied health professions is rising. As Pechak and Thompson (2009) highlighted, "Although sources of data are limited, it does appear that clinicians, faculty members, and students in the United States are increasingly involved in global health initiatives and related activities such as promoting cultural competency" (p. 1193). Additionally, social work and education students are frequently encouraged to participate in an international service immersion experience. "The largest enrollment growth in study abroad programs since 1990 has occurred in programs that are less than one academic quarter in length, growing from 36% of the total study abroad enrollment in 1985-86 to 49% in 2001-2002" (Dwyer, 2004, p. 151). Several scholars have begun to develop models to understand and frame these international service immersion experiences. The leading emergent models are from Kiely (2004; 2005).

Kiely (2005) conducted several longitudinal international service immersion studies at the University of Georgia from 2000-2005. He began by framing his work in that of a well-known theorist – Kolb (1984) – and encouraging other international service immersion practitioners to do the same:

Service-learning theorists and practitioners can readily adapt Kolb’s learning cycle of concrete experience, cognitive reflection, abstract theorization, and experimentation to generate knowledge and facilitate learning in diverse contexts. Along with physically situating students in authentic environments, service-learning programs simplify the Kolb model further by encouraging some form of structured reflection to connect experience with concepts, ideas, and theories and generate new and applicable knowledge in concrete ‘real-life’ situations. (Kiely, 2005, p. 6)

In his research, Kiely (2005) identified five categories that described how students experienced transformational learning in international service immersion experiences: contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalizing, processing, and connecting (p. 9). These five categories articulated a conceptual framework for educators to understand and apply in order to more effectively foster learning processes that lead to transformative outcomes in service-learning. Kiely described each of the five categories of student learning in more detail beginning with contextual border crossing. “Contextual border crossing describes how personal, structural, historical, and programmatic elements of the service-learning context frame the unique nature and impact of students’ service learning experience, either enhancing or hindering possibilities for transformational leadership” (Kiely, p. 9). In other words, in addition to physically crossing a border into another country in order to participate in international service immersion, students also cross personal and historical ‘borders’ as they move through the experience. These borders

frame the experience for the students and lead directly into the second form of student learning – dissonance. “The study results also indicated that the transformational learning process has to do with the type and intensity of dissonance students experience relative to the context factors they bring with them across ‘the border’ and upon return to the U.S.” (Kiely, p. 10).

Kiely’s (2005) third category of learning in international service immersion experiences is personalizing, or making the experience their own. Kiely said:

Personalizing also represents the emotional response students have to different types of dissonance – particularly those that are more intense. Direct contact with the human face of poverty is not something that can be “intellectualized” or “rationalized” away, as students comment over and over during reflection sessions and in journals. (Kiely, p. 12)

For many international service immersion participants, it is the first time that they have experienced extreme poverty, or living conditions so dramatically different than their own experience. As they consider this emotional response, student learning moves from personalizing to processing and then connecting in the fourth and fifth stages Kiely identified.

Processing entails rational, reflective, and importantly, dialogic ways in which students explored and reevaluated their assumptions or engaged with others to understand the origins of and solutions to social problems. Connecting represents the affective dimensions of the transformational learning process in which students developed deeper relationships with locals in an effort to understand and empathize with their life situation. The independent relationship between processing and connecting helps explain how students experience transformation as both an abstract intellectual shift in their understanding of poverty, service-learning, and their citizenship role as a profound change in their sense of moral affiliation and obligation. (Kiely, p. 13)

Processing is an important stage in international service immersion experiences, and it occurs in many forms, including group reflection, individual reflection or journaling, and through conversations with locals as students develop meaningful relationships. Connecting enables students to pull together the various pieces of their international service immersion experience, and begin to make sense of it on a personal level, both as they return to the United States and in the weeks and months following an international service immersion experience. Kiely (2005)

concluded this particular article by urging researchers to, “generate knowledge of, and develop theories about, the contextual, visceral, emotive, and affective aspects that enhance transformational learning in service-learning” (Kiely, p. 18). In other words, scholars and practitioners need to study and understand the models of international service immersion, but we need to look beyond the simple curriculum and plan for the experience, and consider the influence of context and setting. These contextual aspects have a significant ability to influence and shape the experience for international service immersion participants.

Kiely (2004) studied what he calls the “transformative learning pattern” for students who participate in international service immersion. Kiely concluded each study participant experienced at least one out of six forms of perspective transformation as a result of their participation in an international service immersion experience.

Emerging global consciousness describes the ongoing and overall pattern of students’ perspective transformation. Three categories helped integrate and give further meaning to the transformational learning pattern reflected in emerging global consciousness: (1) envisioning, (2) transforming forms, and (3) chameleon complex. Envisioning reflects the initial shift in perspectives in which most students express the “intention to act” on their perspective transformation by actively working for social justice upon return to the United States. Transforming forms represents how each study participant experiences a dynamic shift in how they see themselves and the world in at least one of six different types of perspective transformation: political, moral, intellectual, cultural, personal, and spiritual. Lastly, chameleon complex represents the long-term challenges and struggle college students experience in attempting to change their lifestyle and engage in social action. Emerging global consciousness and the three categories taken together describe students’ perspective transformation as much more complex, dynamic, and multifaceted in nature than previous research. (Kiely, 2004, p. 9)

Many practitioners working with international service immersion experiences enjoy, and sometimes thrive on the perspective transformation that students experience as a result of participation. Kiely (2004) cautioned that practitioners need to recognize the long-term struggle inherent in this “transformative learning” (Kiely, p. 10). More attention must be paid to the “chameleon complex” Kiely identified in order to provide meaningful experiences for

undergraduate student participants, not on while they are on the ground doing international service immersion, but long after they return to their home community.

It is naïve to think scholars and practitioners in the service-learning and international service immersion fields might agree on one “best” model of international service immersion experiences. However, as the work of Kiely (2005) and others identified, it is important to move towards some common standards and best practices, in order to provide students with the most beneficial, and least harmful, experience. Tarrant, Stoner, Borrie, Kyle, Moore, R., and Moore, A. (2011) pointed out one-size-fits-all models are certainly not the answer; however universities and colleges need to engage administrators, faculty, and practitioners across the campus in order to provide the best possible experience for student participants.

International Service Immersion Courses

As models for international service immersion experiences expand, so do academic courses, which generally include more structured pre and post trip time for student participants.

As Tremethick and Smit (2009) pointed out:

The number of short-term faculty led study abroad programs is growing and make up more than half of all the study abroad experiences. Recently, these programs have demonstrated their effectiveness in facilitating cultural competence in numerous disciplines including public health, nursing, business, and pre-service teacher education students. (p. 2)

For faculty members, short term service immersion paired with coursework is an increasingly popular way to prepare students in allied health professions, business, and education for the challenges they may face in their first professional roles. “Well-structured educational travel programs, of any duration, have the potential to promote learning outcomes that go beyond the impact of traditional campus based instruction” (Tarrant, Stoner, Borrie, Kyle, Moore, R., and Moore, A., 2011, p. 407). International service immersion settings enable students to work

through challenging situations including language barriers and lack of resources. Additionally, the experience encourages students to think on their feet, and employ creative solutions, which is perhaps the most powerful learning outcome of all for their future professional work.

The presence of faculty members during international service immersion experiences is powerful for both the faculty and the student. As Warner and Esposito (2009) pointed out, “Immersion service learning experiences put faculty leaders into a variety of new roles, many of which are quite different from that of a usual classroom teaching experience” (p. 510). For students, faculty participation in international service immersion enables them to work alongside faculty members in ways that are generally not possible on campus in a traditional learning environment. Warner and Esposito found students experienced learning differently as a result of working alongside faculty. Similarly, faculty members enjoyed the opportunity to see students learn in a different way, which does not happen on campus. Similar to the way in which colleges and universities consider models for international service immersion experiences that are not course based, attention must also be paid to programs that are housed within for credit courses. Within this framework, opportunities exist for greater preparation time for students prior to their international immersion experience, as well as more engaged reflection and processing with faculty after returning from their international service immersion experience.

International Service Immersion Experiences (Non-Course Based)

Non-Course based international service immersion experiences are currently the most popular model on college and university campuses, and with other non-profit organizations which conduct special interest trips. Literature exists around several aspects of the non-course based international service immersion experience including pre-departure preparation,

relationships developed with individuals served on the ground, and outcomes of student participation.

Pre-Departure Preparation

As Boyle, Nackerud, and Kilpatrick (1999) pointed out, pre-departure preparation is perhaps the most crucial aspect of the international service immersion experience for students. It is essential to share information with participants about the country and culture, and do some pre-trip team building. These preparation pieces assist with stress participants may experience during the trip itself as they, “engage intensely with another culture” (p. 202). Boyle et al. (1999) went on to talk about the importance of flexibility in international service immersion. Things will not always run on time. Plans will change. Students will need more time to discuss a personal struggle. It is important for regular reflection and processing, and at the same time to possess a willingness to go with the flow.

Relationships with Individuals Served

Perhaps the most talked about piece of international service immersion experiences after participants return to their home communities are the relationships that were developed with individuals on the ground. DuPre (2010) shared, “Students learned only about themselves through their interactions (how can you really know how you would act in a certain situation unless you actually do it?), but also about the world beyond their campus walls” (p. 26).

Outcomes of Student Participation

Miller and Gonzalez (2009) found pre/post experience survey results showed differences between participation in service immersion in domestic versus international settings. Miller and Gonzalez encourage future research to explore issues related to the impact of participation in international service-learning activities “on self-reported certainty of needed career skills and

understanding of local communities to determine if this is a function of knowledge related to service context or potential for service context to challenge previously held assumptions” (p. 536).

Eyler (2002) found while service immersion generally had a positive effect on participant attitudes related to social responsibility, the “impact is generally small and many studies are inconclusive. There is reason to believe that the modest effects may be in part due to the great variability in implementation of programs” (p. 518). Through this statement, Eyler highlighted the challenge of exploring the experiences of international service immersion participation, as the programs are so varied. In the same article, Eyler pointed out there had not been much longitudinal research to explore predicted increase in community engagement after participation in service immersion. “But the few relevant studies that have been done are encouraging” (p. 531).

Reflection During International Service Immersion Experiences

Reflection is an important component of the international service immersion experience for many undergraduate student participants. As Hui (2009) pointed out, “Understanding the complexities of power and privilege as a result of participation in an international service immersion trip can leave students struggling to engage in open and meaningful interactions with community members” (p. 23). Group reflection enables participants to explore these complexities as a group, and find ways to navigate individually and collectively as participants move through the experience.

Birmingham (2003) focused on the importance of reflection in service immersion, stating, “There is no substitute for the kind of learning that comes through reflection on direct experience” (p.188). Birmingham further stated, “Aristotle considered virtue to be important for

the community, and community important for virtue, for it is through the community that young people are brought up among examples of virtuous living and are given chances to practice and develop their own moral characters” (p. 193).

Eyler’s (2001) work has focused on reflection for many years. “Reflection is the hyphen in service-learning; it is the process that helps students connect what they observe and experience in the community with their academic study” (p. 35). Eyler asserted without the reflection component of the service experience, it is hard for students to make meaning of the entire process. “While service itself has a positive effect on personal development, if the objectives of service-learning include such cognitive goals as deeper understanding of subject matter, critical thinking, and perspective transformation, intensive and continuous reflection is necessary” (p. 35).

Participating in an international service immersion experience enables undergraduate students to explore their own beliefs and values systems. Eyler (2001) stated:

One of the goals of a reflective practice in service-learning is to help students become aware of their own assumptions and develop the habit of questioning themselves and others. Before students can challenge their own beliefs about the world, they need to know what they believe about the community, the issues, the people they will work with, and themselves. Asking students to bring to the surface some of these thoughts in an explicit way before they perform their initial service may serve as both a benchmark for later reflection and an exercise that heightens their awareness of the frames of reference that they bring to the new experience. From the beginning, they may experience their service in a more reflective way. (p. 36)

In addition to the process of reflection during the international service immersion experience, it is important for the group to consider preparation, and setting the stage for the reflection experiences during the immersion. “Group activities to ‘pre-flect’ on the planned service and its possible relationship to the academic study can generate curiosity. The process can also be used to facilitate team planning for service-related activity and inquiry” (Eyler, 2001, p. 37).

In 2009, Ishii, Gilbride, and Stensrud undertook a study exploring the journals of students who participated in international service immersion. The journals gave the researchers the ability to explore the reactions of the student participants and their methods of information processing and cultural transformation. “Early in this coding process, it was observed that students were not only writing about their experience (e.g. what they had seen) but also about their internal reactions (e.g. their reactions to what they had seen)” (Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, p. 19). Through the process of combining individual written reflections with group reflections, this international service immersion experience provided participants with several ways to explore their feelings, emotions, and thoughts related to the experience.

Williams (2009) stated:

Encouraging students to reflect on their experiences abroad and to articulate their own outcomes, shows that students gain intercultural competence and the ability to articulate it, through specific instances and examples. By giving students multiple methods for reflection, this model provides opportunities for students with different learning styles to reflect on and articulate their experiences from studying abroad. Such a model provides an innovative and significant approach to outcome assessment for study abroad. (p. 304)

William’s assertions are in line with those of Ishii, Gilbride, and Stensrud (2009), providing opportunities for student participants to reflect and engage with the international service immersion experience in a variety of different ways is important to the success of the experience. Crabtree (2008) pointed out, “Facilitating student learning required the ability to help them process their culture shock and its reverberations in their attitudes about the United States” (p. 22). Crabtree further stressed the importance of continuing the reflection process after the students return to the United States – an often forgotten, but critical piece of the international service immersion experience for undergraduate student participants.

Shappell and Barbato (2010) asserted reflection is also the beginning of the development of post immersion practices. Reflection can give space and attention to the process of re-entry

that addresses the learning goals of the experience, personal growth, and social awareness (Shappell & Barbato, p. 1). Shappell and Barbato summarized their study, and this section well, stating, “Students need help exploring and integrating the challenges, complexities, and contradictions that have risen out of their service experiences” (p. 4). Reflection experiences provide this framework, and assist students in preparing for the transition home.

International Service Immersion Evaluation Frameworks

In order to better understand the experience of international service immersion, several researchers have begun to develop various evaluation frameworks – and others who have identified what frameworks could be used. As Eyster (2000) pointed out, “Creative measurement of students’ deep understanding and ability to transfer knowledge is something that cognitive scientists have been struggling with for some time” (p. 11).

Plante (2009), along with various graduate students, has been exploring the experience of international service immersion for some time. In 2009, Plante, Lackey, and Hwang identified there has not yet been research focused on whether the experience of international service immersion helps participants to develop a greater sense of compassion over time, leading to more engaged citizenship. The 2009 study identified international service immersion participants reported a stronger sense of empathy relative to students who did not participate in an international service immersion experience. Plante et al. (2009) cautioned, however, that students who choose to participate in international service immersion might already have a higher degree of compassion than their peers. Plante et al. described the immersion experience:

It is possible that immersion experiences help to foster compassion through direct contact with the poor and marginalized of society. It is plausible that in being exposed to these conditions and environments, students gained a more concrete understanding of how people’s ways of thinking and acting varied according to their situations, culture, history, and economy. These aspects could enable them to be more sensitive to what others feel

and think, developing in them a greater sense of empathy, compassion, and connection than they had possessed before attending the immersion trip. (p. 40)

Plante et al. (2009) also noted student scores on the compassion instrument were related to other constructs. Students with higher compassion in general tended to report greater strength of faith as well. The researchers hypothesize this connection could be due to the emphasis world religions place on compassion and service.

In a related study, Mills, Bersamina, and Plante (2003) found after returning from an international service immersion trip, students report a greater ability to cope with stress and a stronger sense of personal vocational identity. Mills et al. (2003) suggested the experience of doing international service immersion provides new “avenues of discovery” (p. 5), which provide the international service immersion participants with insights into their own lives. As we continue to learn more about the experiences of international service immersion, it is important to continue to develop frameworks that can compare various experiences, and the experience of the participants.

International Service Immersion and Student Development

Astin and Sax (1998) identified through their research that participation in service during undergraduate years enhances student’s academic development, civic responsibility, and life skills. It is not hard to draw connections between the overwhelming increase in international service immersion experiences on college campuses and within organizations and the perceived positive influence on college student development. Crabtree (2008) pointed out the perceived transformation:

One of the claims made often about experiential education, service learning, and international immersions alike are their ability to transform participants. The desired transformations facilitated by ISL may include an awakening to self, to other, and to the world; increased knowledge, confidence, and language skills; and the development of

more complex and personal understandings of other cultures and culture others, and of community, poverty, and justice. (p. 26)

Crabtree highlighted other changes in the student including moving from a charity orientation towards a more social justice orientation on issues such as “global awareness, service, development, and the roles of individuals as agents of change” (p. 26). Other researchers have looked at the experience of international service immersion to explore student development in more specific areas including personal development, moral/ethical development, and long term development.

Personal Development

In a report released in 2009, the American Council on Education asserted, “Producing a citizenry with global competence is the responsibility of our nation’s educational system” (p. 23). The experience of international service immersion is just one of the ways that higher education can contribute to the goal of educating global citizens. The personal development which takes place as a result of an international service immersion experience is one such example of this development of a global citizen. Livermore (2006) noted the top reason people participate in short-term service immersion experiences is for the “life-changing experiences it promises them” (p. 50). Several researchers have explored the variety of “life-changing” experiences provided.

Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) found the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the “single best predictor of their learning and personal development” (p. 410). Einfeld and Collins (2008) revealed one of the most constant findings in their research on service-learning is that the service experience reduces negative stereotypes in students and increases the student’s tolerance for diversity. Einfeld and Collins stated, “Education for citizenship should not simply encourage civic engagement and active citizenship.

Education should also equip students with the multicultural competence, understanding of systemic inequality, and empowerment to effectively pursue social justice through civic engagement” (p. 108). Although some of the aspects of multicultural competence, systemic inequality, and empowerment to pursue social justice can be hard to pack into a week-long international service immersion experience, this research highlights the importance of extending the experience both before and after the actual trip to maximize the student learning experience.

Jones and Abes (2004) found service immersion has a lasting influence on the identities of undergraduate student participants. Jones and Abes also identified student participants, “struggled to articulate how socially constructed dimensions of their identities were impacted, speaking most consistently to social class” (p. 159). Jones and Abes identified the students reflected on how the experience of immersion influenced their attitudes, values, decisions, and actions. Boss (1994) found service can help build self-confidence in student participants, as students develop assertiveness and ego-strength through the completion of service work.

Engberg (2013) used a college impact research design to explore the student experience of service learning. Engberg stated, “There appears to be an emerging collection of research that suggests study away experiences may be important vehicles in fostering growth along cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains of student development” (p. 477). Through this research, evidence was uncovered linking service immersion to all three domains of student development. Engberg found that the strongest effects occurred in the interpersonal realm, asserting that service is an important tool to promote civic engagement, social justice orientation, and interactions across differences. Engberg also found service participation was related to increased cultural knowledge and a stronger sense of self.

Chickering and Braskamp (2009) explored the development of global perspectives in undergraduate service participants. Chickering and Braskamp found developing a global perspective requires the development of personal and social responsibility, based on, “interdependence, identity, purpose, and emotional intelligence” (p. 2). Chickering and Braskamp found for students to develop a sense of purpose, the process of becoming competent in understanding persons who differ widely in their political, religious, and spiritual orientations, as well as privilege and social class, ethnicity and national origin is important. Chickering and Braskamp also noted the importance of global perspectives in today’s changing society.

Moral/Ethical Development

Numerous researchers have explored the moral and ethical development of undergraduate students as a result of participation in international service immersion experiences. Baxter-Magolda (1998) looked at the experience of moral and ethical development through the process of self-authorship. Baxter-Magolda asserted because one of the major goals of higher education is to prepare citizens for effective leadership and participation in society, higher education must be concerned with the development of self-authorship in students. Participation in service-immersion leads to the development of self-authorship in undergraduate students in several ways. “Introducing multiple perspectives and mutually working through the process of analyzing different views and making a decision helps students confront complexity and learn how to deal with it.” (p. 154).

Boss (1994) looked at the development of moral reasoning among college students. Boss found that students who participated in service work made greater developments in their moral reasoning in comparison to students who did not participate in service work. The students who participated in service work reported strengthened self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as

heightened moral sensitivity. Boss also found participation in service provided students a chance to explore moral issues, in some cases related to career choice or personal moral dilemmas.

Kelly (2011) wrote about the challenges for students related to traveling to developing countries and experiencing immersion in cultures with personal contact. This level of immersion, Kelly asserted, requires students to confront the reality that universal human problems exist which demand collaboration and solidarity. The challenge becomes, that students must then navigate the use of their own personal privilege for the benefit of others (p. 22).

Crabtree (2007) looked at the difference between fostering a sense of “responsibility to” versus a sense of “responsibility for” partners in developing nations while participating in international service immersion experiences (p. 42). Crabtree asserted students are more likely to develop an advocacy role upon their return to the United States, turning their experiences into capacity. Further work could be done to assess the growth of students who return home taking this approach to their international service immersion experience. Welch (2010) arrived at slightly different conclusions than Crabtree, concluding students are right to take satisfaction in their short term accomplishments, but sometimes come to realize that these accomplishments might have short-term impact. “Despite seeing tangible results of their work, students may also discover the complexities of issues with which they are dealing, and wonder if what they really do matters” (Welch, p. 3).

Long Term Development

Many participants in international service immersion experiences list the personal change and development along the top reasons for participating in such an experience. In his 2004 study, Kiely found shortly after returning from an international service immersion experience, participants consistently report a sense of empowerment, and a hopeful intention to act on their

emerging global consciousness (p. 10). Participants spoke about long term plans for changes to their lifestyle, relationships, and social policies in deference to the economic disparities, health problems, and poverty they witnessed. Kiely (2004) did not conduct a longer term follow up with these participants to determine the success of their intentions.

In 1999, Avelos, Sax, and Astin completed a study which looked at both the short term and longer term effects of service participation during undergraduate years. The research found undergraduate service participation continues to have direct effects on the student for at least five years following the completion of their undergraduate degree. Avelos et al. (1999) also found participation in service during undergraduate years also had several other direct effects including the likelihood of attending graduate school, and the acquisition of higher degrees (p. 192).

Related to the long term personal development of undergraduate service immersion participation, a 2009 study at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities found the length of time students spend in another country has no significant impact on whether they become globally engaged later in life. In other words, a student could spend one week completing a service immersion experience or sixteen weeks in a traditional study abroad program, and there is no discernible difference between the two in long term impacts on global engagement and learning (Fischer, 2009). As short-term experiences continue to overtake traditional study abroad experiences, these findings are important for both student participants and experience coordinators to consider.

Summary of Literature

Eyler and Giles (1999) hypothesized about the variety of service immersion experiences occurring, and the inability to effectively study and determine the outcomes of these experiences in a way that can be generalized. Eyler (2000) in a later article asserted we need to refine our

definition of the intellectual outcomes associated with service-immersion and to then develop appropriate measurements. Eyler went on to lay out several questions for researchers to consider when studying service learning. In contrast, Kiely (2005) encouraged fellow researchers to broaden their focus, and instead of looking at precise methods, we should instead be looking at contextual, visceral, emotive, and affective aspects of international service immersion experiences.

The disagreement among scholars in the field serves as an indicator of the importance of all of the research, and also for the need to push scholars and scholar practitioners to continue to make meaning of the variety of international service immersion experiences for our students. As this overview of literature related to international service immersion experiences shows, the experiences themselves as well as the outcomes for student participants are broad and diverse.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis study was to explore the experience of returning home to the United States after completing an international service immersion trip, and the feelings and emotions undergraduate students might experience as a result of international service immersion. Additionally, the study explored the experiences of undergraduate students after completing a short term (one week) international service immersion trip to better understand the phenomena related to these experiences and the learning experiences of undergraduate students who participate in international services immersion. The experiences of undergraduate students as a result of participation in an international service immersion trip are best examined using a phenomenological approach which enables the researcher to examine the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007).

The interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) method (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was used to examine how undergraduate students make sense of their international service immersion experience, and the experience of returning to the United States after completing international service immersion. Interpretive phenomenological analysis enables the researcher to explore, describe, interpret, and situate the international service immersion experience for the study participants (Smith et al., 2009). For this study, the overarching research question was: What was the experience of undergraduate students upon their return from an international service immersion trip?

- Questions:
 - What are the experiences of undergraduate students as they leave the country of service at the conclusion of their international service immersion trip?

- How did the participants experience the curriculum of the service immersion experience in relationship to their personal experience of returning home?
- How do the planned daily curriculum and reflection opportunities included in an international service immersion trip influence the experience of returning home for undergraduate students?
- What are the experiences of undergraduate students during their first month back in the United States following an international service immersion trip?
- How do undergraduate students make meaning of the international service immersion experience in the months following their trip?

To understand the experience of international service immersion experiences on college student development, a constructivist framework was utilized. Social constructivism (Creswell, 2007) provides a framework for developing meaning from lived experiences such as an international service immersion trip. Social constructivism seeks to rely, “as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” (p. 20). A constructivist approach was selected for this study because of the emphasis on the meaning the individual participant makes of their international service immersion experience. The researcher acknowledges the constructivist assumption that contextual factors including the researcher, methodology, underlying theory, and respondents cannot be completely separated from subjective beliefs and values (Manning, 1999).

Participants and Site

Study participants were members of an international fraternity that encourages members to participate in service immersion experiences during their undergraduate years. Alumni were also invited to participate in the service immersion trips, and join undergraduate students for each experience. Study participants completed international service immersion in a Caribbean

country in May or June 2014. Twelve participants join each international service immersion experience for the international fraternity, providing a potential pool of up to 24 participants for this proposed study. All 24 international service immersion participants were invited to participate in a virtual face to face interview for the proposed study, utilizing WebEx technology. Interviews were scheduled as participants volunteered for ten participants.

The international fraternal organization that hosts the service immersion experiences has been conducting trips to this site since 2010. The group currently hosts five international trips each spring – one in January, two in March, one in May, and one in June. The full time staff person who oversees the program splits time between the service immersion site in the Caribbean and the fraternity headquarters. Additionally, this staff person has approximately 15 years of experience working on college campuses and for international organizations in the area of service-learning.

Data Collection

Video conference interviews were scheduled with international service immersion trip participants following their international service immersion experience. In the month immediately following the international service immersion trip, participants were interviewed to learn more about their experience on the immersion trip, leaving the country of service, and returning home. See APPENDIX A for an interview schedule for the first interview. Interviews were recorded, and conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol, in the tradition of interpretive phenomenological analysis. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is best suited for research which invites participants to offer detailed, first-hand accounts of their experiences. Participants were invited to tell stories and encouraged to speak freely and reflectively about their international service immersion experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

To schedule the interviews, the researcher was provided with contact information for each international service immersion experience participant on the May and June trips from the international fraternity hosting the trips. The researcher began by sending an introductory email to the students explaining the purpose of the study and outlining the opportunity to participate, risks for participation, and the confidentiality of the data collected. The consent form was included in this initial communication with the invitation to participate. Out of the 24 potential interview candidates, only first time participants in international service immersion experiences were eligible for participation in the study. Interested participants signed and returned the consent form, and then an interview was scheduled. The interviewer sought to interview a balance of participants from all levels of undergraduate study – freshman through senior years.

Interviews for the May 2014 trip participants occurred in June and early July 2014. Interviews for the June 2014 trip participants occurred in July 2014. Interviews took place in a video format, via WebEx. Interviews were recorded. Interview participants were assigned pseudonyms in the data analysis phase, and participant identity and identifying characteristics are not included in the reporting of participant experiences. In interpretive phenomenological analysis, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommended gaining informed consent for both participation in data collection as well as the potential inclusion of verbatim extracts in published material. The process of data reporting and the usage of pseudonyms were explained to research participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) outlined a set of common steps in the data review and analysis process for interpretive phenomenological analysis. In the first step of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) analysis, the transcript from each individual interview was read

and re-read by the researcher to become more familiar with the experience of each individual participant, and begin to identify central ideas in each individual experience. This first stage involved the researcher immersing oneself in the original data, and helps to ensure that the participant becomes the focus of analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Second, a detailed set of notes were completed individually on each of the original interview transcripts one by one utilizing descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments (Smith et al.). Descriptive comments focus on the context of what the study participant has said. Key words and phrases are recorded and help the researcher to further understand the study participant's thoughts and experiences. Linguistic comments highlight the use of language by the study participant. Conceptual comments are focused on a conceptual level (Smith et al.). In the third step of interpretive phenomenological analysis, researcher comments were analyzed to identify emergent themes in the data, still considering each of the individual interview transcripts individually as separate cases. At this point in the analysis process, the themes reflected both individual study participant stories as well as the interpretation of the researcher. Fourth, each transcript was reviewed for connections and emergent themes from individual international service immersion trip participants, again as separate cases. Finally, all individual cases were compared to determine patterns across all of the cases as well as to identify the themes that were most prominent in all individual experiences.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness in the study and in the tradition of interpretive phenomenological analysis, summaries of researcher analysis and interpretation of each individual interview were shared with the participants as a form of member checking.

Additionally, summaries and themes were shared with international service immersion practitioners to gain feedback on emergent themes.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommended four broad principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research, which they interpret from Lucy Yardley (2008). The four principles are sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance (Smith et al., 2009). The first principle, sensitivity to context, is demonstrated through an appreciation of the interactional nature of data collection with the interview situation. This requires the IPA researcher to demonstrate empathy, put the interviewee at ease, and produce a good interview.

The second principle, commitment and rigor, is demonstrated in IPA research through a commitment to being attentive to the participants during the data collection phase. For this study, this happened during each individual interview, as well as during the pre- and post-interview communication with each study participant. This was further carried out through careful analysis of each individual interview transcript. Third, transparency asks the IPA researcher to clearly describe the research process in the write up of the study. IPA researchers can accomplish this through detailing participant selection, how the interview schedule was constructed, and steps followed in the analysis process. The final principle, impact and importance, asserts that the true validity of the IPA study is found in whether the researcher tells the readers something important, interesting, or useful (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this study, the research told the stories of ten international service immersion experience participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis study was to explore the experience of returning home to the United States after completing an international service immersion trip, and the feelings and emotions undergraduate students might experience as a result of international service immersion. Additionally, the study explored the experiences of undergraduate students after completing a short term (one week) international service immersion trip to better understand the phenomena related to these experiences and the learning experiences of undergraduate students who participate in international services immersion. In an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), primary research questions focused on the participant's understanding of their own lived experiences. Questions are designed to explore rather than explain, reflect process, rather than outcome, and explore meaning, rather than concrete cause (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). For this study, the overarching research question was: What was the experience of undergraduate students upon their return from an international service immersion trip?

Questions:

- What are the experiences of undergraduate students as they leave the country of service at the conclusion of their international service immersion trip?
- How did the participants experience the curriculum of the service immersion experience in relationship to their personal experience of returning home?
- How do the planned daily curriculum and reflection opportunities included in an international service immersion trip influence the experience of returning home for undergraduate students?

- What are the experiences of undergraduate students during their first month back in the United States following an international service immersion trip?
- How do undergraduate students make meaning of the international service immersion experience in the months following their trip?

Participant Demographics

The ten research participants all identified as male. Of the ten participants, eight identified as Caucasian, one identified as being of Asian descent, and one identified as Hispanic. All participants were traditional aged undergraduate students (ages 19-22) when they participated in their international service immersion experience as well as the interviews for this study. Study participants represent a diverse set of academic majors and professional interests. In country experiences in Jamaica were comparable across both immersion trips for the study participants. The reflection materials and supporting cultural immersion activities were constant, and the service activities performed in the communities varied slightly – the second trip built upon the work of the first trip group. All participants had the opportunity to participate in construction projects, tour villages, and play games and conduct educational activities for school aged children. All participants visited various cultural sites and participated in immersion activities in the local community. To preserve the anonymity of the student participants, pseudonyms were used.

Filip was a junior at a public research university in a Midwestern college town. The university is the flagship institution in the state system. He completed a summer internship in a large Midwestern city after returning from his service immersion experience in Jamaica. He grew up in a small town in the upper Midwest.

Wayland was a senior at a public land-grant research university located in a Midwestern college town. The university is the flagship institution in the state system. He was originally born in another country, and has lived in the United States for many years, and has traveled extensively, most frequently in Asia. English is not Wayland's first language.

Alfredo was a junior at a public, state-related research university in the middle-Atlantic, located in a college town. The university is the flagship institution in the state system. He completed a summer internship in a large middle-Atlantic city after returning from his service immersion experience in Jamaica.

Milford was a senior at a public, land-grant institution in the Midwest. He completed an internship in a large Midwestern city after returning from his service immersion experience in Jamaica. He initially chose to participate in the service immersion program because his class sequence did not allow for study abroad opportunities.

Nicholas was a junior at a public research university in a Midwestern college town. The university is the flagship institution in the state system. He is a leader of the institution's largest student-run philanthropy project.

Connor was a senior at a private, nonsectarian research university in the northeast. He has traveled extensively, including in Central America. He served as the president of a student philanthropy organization during the 2013-2014 academic year.

Enoch was a senior at a small public institution, which is part of the state system in a southern state. He has travelled to Central American countries previously. He holds strong religious beliefs and is an active participant in his faith community.

Jackson was a senior at a public, land-grant institution in the Midwest. He has traveled internationally before, but not as part of a service/mission trip experience. He hopes to serve in the Peace Corps after graduation.

Stuart was a senior at a public, land-grant institution in the Northwest. The university is the flagship institution in the state system. He has served as a leader of his chapter, and was inspired to participate in the service immersion program after participating in another leadership program sponsored by his fraternity.

Preston was a junior at a large, public, liberal arts University located in the upper Midwest. He has served as a leader in his chapter and hopes to participate in future international immersion trips after he graduates.

Data Analysis and Emergent Themes

Utilizing the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, emergent themes from each individual study participant were considered based on the transcription and analysis of their interview. Individual themes were identified and then compared to develop overall patterns and interpretations from the entire research sample for consideration. Overall themes that emerged were Exploring Poverty, Exploring Privilege, Global Citizenship, Power of Education, Helping vs. Serving, and Fraternity Connections. Each of the emergent themes is explored in depth in the data analysis below.

Theme One: Exploring Poverty

As participants in the international service immersion experience to Jamaica talked about their experience, exploring concepts of poverty was important for many of the participants. This theme relates most closely to research question one: what are the experiences of undergraduate students as they leave the country of service at the conclusion of the international service

immersion trip? Participants grappled with concepts of experiencing poverty firsthand on the ground in Jamaica, the stark contrast of poverty in Jamaica, and the experience of returning home, and trying to make meaning of experiences of poverty at home. Participants struggled to identify areas in their own home communities where poverty and wealth were juxtaposed in the way they found them to be in Jamaica.

When talking about the experience of arriving in Jamaica, and exploring the first few days experiencing the culture, Filip shared:

I was a little bit shocked because I wasn't really expecting all the poverty in Jamaica. I kept on thinking, "oh it is kind of more like Second World Country than Third World." That just wasn't the case at all. Just the striking contrast between the rich and the poor.

The contrast of extreme poverty against the backdrop of very nice luxury tourist resort properties in Jamaica was hard for some participants to comprehend. Nicholas shared:

I remember being very surprised at how there can be, like, very nice resorts and then there would be, like, shanty pads a block away, not even if there was a nice house and then somebody right next to it. Another thing that took me back was how many buildings were unfinished. I thought that was very surprising. Their way of building things was to take as much money as they have, build what they can, and then leave the rest for later which is kind of stupid considering how much it rains there. But that's just the way they do things.

Experiencing similar feelings about pre-conceived notions of Jamaica, and reflecting on the experience of driving through the country initially, Jackson shared:

When you think of Jamaica, you think about resorts, islands. You don't see all this poverty. They don't really show it. They kind of hide it. When we were driving though, there were shanty towns right next to these huge houses. That was something I hadn't seen before. Also, walking on the beach, there were a lot of pushers, and lots of drug dealing going on, and that as something that I didn't expect. They told me that there were drug dealers in Jamaica, but it was literally 10 minutes on the beach and someone was trying to sell me something. I expected that, but I didn't expect how fast it was going to be, and the quantity of interactions that we had with drug dealers on the trip. But at the same time, once we figured out the ropes with how to deal with them, that was not an issue at all. Once you've made it clear you weren't interested, they usually left us alone.

Basically by day three, they knew all of us weren't interested in anything that they were selling so they left us alone.

Wondering about the connection between poverty and the military presence, and if there was a tie, Stuart shared:

Just driving through the country, it was really shocking to see the poverty levels in some places and then just big crazy mansions in other places. Then there were just trucks full of soldiers decked out with all of their gear, all their guns. We just drove next to them. I thought that was kind of insane.

The issue of military policing wasn't explored more in depth according to the participant, but he wondered once he returned home if there could be a connection. Stuart went on to share:

I thought it was crazy how much you have to say no to all the locals, because they're all offering you to buy all sorts of stuff, whether it would be like necklaces, clothes, drugs. It's unbelievable, like, the first day I was like 'Oh my God.' I kind of felt bad for saying no, but it's obviously like we had to say no. Midway through the week a guy came up to us and was offering us some weed. We were like, 'No, we're actually doing this service trip.' He got so embarrassed and he put it away. He pulled out a picture of his daughter – she went to the school we were working on. He told us, "Thank you guys so much." It was crazy.

Like Stuart, several participants shared about the experience of being approached to buy drugs and other materials. Stuart was particularly affected by the experience of encountering a man whose daughter they were there to help. His facial expression and tone changed as he described this experience. It still sticks with him today as a profound moment during the week. He never encountered the man's daughter.

As an American, it is easy to see and believe images of a touristy Jamaica that one sees on TV and reads about in magazines. Preston shared:

It was a bit shocking like to drive in and see, we kind of forget that Jamaica is actually a Third World Country because we all see symbols, commercials, everything is just portrayed as a beautiful place in the Caribbean. But it's crazy what the people of Jamaica are going through on a daily basis. They get by with what they have. It was just interesting. That was definitely a much different world.

Similarly to other participants on the trip, Milford shared about the experiences of being approached to buy goods, as well as the contrast of shacks next to more luxurious properties. He was a bit unnerved by the pushiness of those selling items initially, and said that it became more routine as the week went on. He shared:

That was the biggest thing that struck me is how poor some people are. They have no shame in asking for money, asking for help, or trying to sell you random little necklaces on the beach. They were very pushy in that sense. That's how they make their living, which isn't much, but that's how they do it. That was shocking. Just driving around, it was amazing to see shacks and shacks and then a giant house because who knows what that guy did, and then more shacks. At least in the U.S. it is a little more separated like in a nicer community, not as nice communities. But they were right next to each other and it seemed like no one cared that much. It was very surprising.

More so than his fellow participants, Milford named the feeling of wondering how some individuals in the economy in Jamaica were able to build nicer houses, while their neighbors struggled to make ends meet. He identified that in the United States, we don't see such stark contrast in most neighborhoods.

As he reflected on how the poverty in Jamaica has stuck with him beyond his immersion trip experience, Filip shared:

I think one lesson was that money doesn't buy happiness has definitely kept on. It has persisted in my mind. I think that material things have stayed in my mind as well. Working in this place where the homes are huge, and they have all the affiliated things that go with them. And, just making the best out of what you have. Being more family oriented, and building all [of] your relationships.

Alfredo initially took a more active approach to reflecting on the poverty experienced on the ground in Jamaica, by exploring issues in his own community. Alfredo shared:

For the first week or so that I was back, I was thinking for, like, every different possible issue in the community, and was, like, housing problems – we're not having poverty and all of that kind of stuff. And thinking and brainstorming ways that we as a community can work towards fixing that. So, it just kind of got me in the mindset that there are problems out there, but they also have solutions to the problems that are achievable.

For Filip, the contrast of returning home to a wealthy suburb was challenging, especially when he encountered individuals in his home environment who were not happy. Given his recent experience, it was hard for him to make meaning of the unhappiness, when he perceived those around him at home to have so much in comparison to those he encountered in Jamaica. Filip shared:

I'm working in a suburb this summer. The average home isn't really average. Coming back from Jamaica and seeing how poor it is and the poverty there, to working in a place where there are multimillion dollar homes everywhere I'm looking. It was a big challenge, thinking 'how can these people have so much, yet they're not happy.' Seeing wealth and poverty side by side was insane.

Other participants struggled to explain or make meaning of the poverty once they returned home and tried to explain the experience to friends and family who did not have context for the reflections. This was especially hard for Nicholas who shared:

I don't know. I guess a lot of people were asking me 'How did it go? What was it like?' I thought that was kind of hard describing in some ways, just like the stark contrast and just like poverty there. For the most part, if they ask me how it was, I would just say good. It was a life changing experience for sure. I usually tell people that, it was life changing.

For Jackson, poverty was the central part of the story he shared when he returned home. He was clear in his reflection about wanting others to understand what he saw and experienced on the ground, and wants more to have that same experience. Jackson shared:

I talked a lot about the poverty that we saw there, and the intense human suffering. I made it clear that it was a good experience, but there should be more of it [the service work].

Overall, poverty was a central facet of the experience for each of the participants on some level – whether it was exploring the concepts and wanting to understand more, or not being able to process the starkness upon returning home. As the most common emergent theme, exploring poverty serves as a central part of the international service immersion trip experience for

participants and helps us understand the experience of undergraduate students as they leave the country of service at the end of an international service immersion experience.

Theme Two: Exploring Privilege

For the undergraduate student participants in the international service immersion experience, it was hard for many to explore poverty without also exploring their own privilege. This occurred both during the time in Jamaica and after the participants returned home to the United States. It also occurred in a variety of ways. For some participants, this became evident as they developed relationships with individuals they met on the ground during their time in Jamaica. This theme provides support to answer research question 3: How do the planned daily curriculum and reflection opportunities included in an international service immersion trip influence the experience of returning home for undergraduate students? Wayland shared a story about an individual he met during his time in Jamaica:

I actually felt privileged, like the social distance. I made a really good friend called Shabban. He was like 20 years old same as me. He had a job of construction, so he could help building the school. He worked with others. He's been doing that for like five years already. We became really good friends. He liked music. He liked football. He had Facebook. So we really became good friends. The last day, he asked me 'If you are throwing away your shorts, I'll take them.' It was actually really shocking to me, because the shorts were really dirty because we did all the concrete work, and dirty stuff. My shorts were really dirty, and I would have thrown them away. But he asked me. I didn't really want to give something bad, something dirty to my friend. It's kind of really weird; we are all friends, we have no difference, but actually there is a really big difference. So that's kind of shocking.

For Wayland, the concept of exploring his own privilege was one of the central themes of his experience during the trip and after he returned home. He went on to reflect that:

It was a really good experience to actually realize what privileges that we had when I start maybe, because when I'm in the United States, I always look for something that I don't have. I don't have this. I don't have, like, sad times, like money and something, blah blah blah. But when I had actually been to Jamaica, I realized that I have so many privileges. It's probably more than what I don't have but I just didn't really realize when I was in the United States. Now that's a really good experience for my life, I think.

For Enoch, the experience of privilege emerged in his interactions with peers and family members upon returning home. Enoch shared:

Here in America everybody has every reason not to be happy for not having this, for not having that, whereas, like, down there just the littlest things make everyone happy. They all have the smiles on their faces and everything.

Alfredo experienced the privilege as he reflected upon his own upbringing versus the children and stories he encountered in Jamaica. As he returned home, he began to understand that some of his biggest issues were not really issues at all. He's still working through this as he re-integrates into his life in the United States. His struggle with this is evident through the look on his face and his reflective pauses as he speaks. Alfredo shared:

The only real challenge I faced was kind of like emotional sort of, because I was upset with myself or doubting myself that I had taken so much for granted before. Because in Jamaica, I realized like their situations compared to ours is just nothing. It is so totally different. Like here, growing up, I would get mad if my Xbox broke, down there they are, like, off the walls if they have a ball to play with. I think I just kind of doubted myself for those couple of days that I was there that I had been, I don't know, I felt kind of self-obsessed. And not to brag about this at all, but I was very upset with myself that I had come to think that my issues were actually issues, where people down there, they would laugh at the problems we have. They would love to have those kinds of problems. I felt bad for some of those acts.

For Jackson, the concept was broached a bit more easily. He approached things differently and with new relaxed perspective upon his return to the United States. Jackson shared:

Mostly what I saw was that little things didn't bother me as much after seeing all the crap, for lack of a better word, all these kids had to go through. Just the suffering I'd seen. Coming back things just didn't bother me as much. I was really relaxed. Also, I felt like I should be doing something. I wanted to kind of get back and change, and do something again.

Preston learned about the theme of exploring privilege from those he interacted with during his time in Jamaica. He is now attempting to live more small in his life at home. Preston shared:

I think one of the biggest things I learned from the Jamaican culture is they tell you to live small. I think in a way there are lots of possessions you have, but realizing that we have an entire world around us. And we take into luxuries and other things; we have to understand that we are sharing everything in this world.

Several participants mentioned sharing the concepts of privilege with their parents upon returning home to the United States. Filip shared:

I told my parents that we do have an obligation, being well off and we have enough money to do things, and help out people across the world, not just in the community we are living in. I guess I should keep that in mind.

For Alfredo, he uses his experience to remind others in his family that they actually have a lot to be thankful for. He indicated that he shares this with his mother on a fairly regular basis now. Alfredo shared:

The one big thing that I mentioned is that the problems that we have aren't problems at all. I bring this up all the time now when my mom is complaining about work or something, I kind of joke about it.

Milford situated his reflections on his own privilege within the context of recognizing what he has available to him in life, and regularly being thankful for those things. Milford shared:

I really just told them that it was a life changing experience, really being fully immersed in their culture, seeing how their school system works, it really makes you appreciate living in the US, especially if you're going through any hard time, for me it's I'm going to school, hard exams coming up, or whatever. I can look back and say 'I have it so much better than they do already,' I really need to appreciate this, appreciate what I have. So, that was definitely a big thing. We had something that I totally forgot. It was a life changing experience. I would love to go back, if I had the chance.

Many of the participants explored both the themes of poverty and privilege, but it was clear that the concepts of privilege were more personal. Some participants felt guilty coming home to what they realized was much more than others have available. Other participants actively explored ways to utilize their own privilege to create a positive impact for either the people of Jamaica that they encountered during the trip or individuals in their own home communities. The theme of exploring privilege helps us to understand how the planned daily

curriculum and reflection opportunities influence the experience of returning home for undergraduate students.

Theme Three: Global Citizenship

For several international service immersion trip participants, the themes of poverty and privilege went one step further as individuals considered their own roles as global citizens, and the responsibilities that come along with that role. This theme helps to answer the fourth research question of the study: What are the experiences of undergraduate students during their first month back in the United States following an international service immersion trip? For Jackson, this included being fully immersed in the culture of Jamaica:

I wanted to be embedded in the culture and I think [the service trip] did a really good job of that. When you travel to a lot of places, it sometimes feels like you're not really experiencing the culture. So, my expectation was that we were going to be embedded and get hands on experience, and not really be guests in the place that were going to be, but actually be a part of Jamaica, and see the real Jamaica I guess would be a good way to put it.

Milford enjoyed the experience of developing deeper relationships with the individuals the group encountered on the ground in Jamaica. He shared:

I was really looking forward to seeing how much we could really get to know the people. Because that's just as much a part of the service as actually working at the school—in my opinion at least—because it's really trying to get to know them and figure out what their life is like, it's so different from ours.

For Connor, themes of global citizenship came directly from the group reflections that took place each evening. He shared:

We did some of the lessons—like later at night just some recaps of the day. So, that really got us thinking and personalizing the experience, like, our place as a global citizen was big, that was pushed. It was nice to see that we made some progress on our project, but then taking that away from Jamaica, like we built a couple of sidewalks. In the grand scheme, I think that's not so much, but it is something. It was kind of bitter sweet that we were able to do something, but then there's so much more to be done. It's kind of like a tease almost.

Similarly, Enoch shared:

The lessons and things that I developed in the trip were being an active leader, and changing things like global awareness of the citizens around me. The bond of brotherhood, teamwork, little things don't matter as much. Those were some of the lessons that I've learned that you should just be happy with your life, and to give 110% on everything that you do.

Milford applied the concepts of being a global citizen to the local level, and is looking forward to being a more active citizen at home. He shared:

Being an active citizen is really making that more of a priority, trying to find ways to step out of your comfort zone, and do something, not necessarily as big as going to Jamaica but in our community.

For Connor, exploring global citizenship came as a result of exploring the local culture in Jamaica, and having the experience of talking with local people to learn more about their individual stories was an impactful experience for him. He shared:

I think putting an emphasis on the culture days, as she put it, it would be one thing to go down there and go directly to the job sites, and do our work and leave. But actually going into the community, being able to talk with some of them kind of put emphasis on what we were doing. It wasn't just the school. It was education.

Jackson also reflected on the theme of global citizenship through the encounters he had with individuals he met while on the ground in Jamaica. He shared:

Jamaica and Jamaicans really had a sense of one people. There was one guy on the beach who was talking to us. He said we all have the same red blood in our veins. We talked with him for a couple of hours. There was a definite sense that we are all one people when you look at each other. That was a cool experience. It was a different country completely, but I brought that back with me. It was cool. That really touched me that we are all human and we are all part of the same human family and we need to look out for each other.

For Milford, the experience of global citizenship was a capstone experience of sorts. He mentioned that he was interested in completing a traditional study abroad experience during his undergraduate years, but because of his academic program of study and leadership responsibilities on campus, he wasn't able to make that happen. For him, the international

service immersion trip seemed like the perfect solution, and helped him to develop as a global citizen, which he named as one of his reasons for participating in the experience. He shared:

Seeing that I could go abroad to do philanthropic work that kind of related to a study abroad type thing, going to another country and experiencing the culture. It really combined everything for me, and worked out amazingly. I loved it.

Each of the participants in the international service immersion trip experienced global citizenship differently, and for some, it did not emerge as an overall theme in their reflection about the experience and their return home to the United States. For those that did share reflections related to a broader world view, there was variety in the depth of responses. The theme of global citizenship helps us to understand the experiences of undergraduate students during their first month back in the United States after an international service immersion experience.

Theme Four: The Power of Education

Several international service immersion trip participants mentioned the ties between their participation in the immersion trip and developing a greater understanding of the role of education in developing a society. This theme helps to answer the third research question of the study: How do the planned daily curriculum and reflection opportunities included in an international service immersion trip influence the experience of returning home for an undergraduate student?

For Connor, it was the overall role of education, and more specifically, the education he had access to as he was growing up. He shared:

I don't know if I changed any habits, but I definitely take education more seriously, I guess. I kind of think I took it for granted. I grew up in a really nice town in [an affluent area in the Northeast]. I always had a good school, good teachers, was fortunate enough to come to the [my university] where the education is great. So, I never really put the emphasis that I should have kind of. What I learnt from this experience, because there, one of the workers that helped us out, he went up until high school. He didn't make the

test to get into high school, so that was it for him. Then that's just something we do here, no matter who you are, you go to high school here. So it definitely put more respect on education.

For Milford, it was the potential impact trip participants had on the development of the children in the community where they were serving and the further realization that the children in the community lack a lot of adult support that he had available to him as a child (and still has, he noted). He shared:

One of the things that stuck with me from [the service trip] was our leader telling us that when we hung out with the kids at lunchtime, we are potentially the only meaningful contact they have with an adult that day. You don't know what their parents do, how much they're around. That really stuck with me that I go home, I can choose who I hang out with; I choose to spend time with them. They want to spend time with me as well and knowing that just really comforts me. It's amazing that they can't always have that. So, that's made me appreciate my life.

Filip drew connections between the interactions with the children during the service immersion experience and his own childhood and the simple things he enjoyed growing up. He realized through the course of his reflection that at the end of the day, we are all very similar. He shared:

I felt pretty satisfied at the end of the trip, just, like, not only knowing that we'd helped out so many kids, but also knowing how much—I guess—I learned and I hoped all of the kids learned as well, that we've helped. Knowing that these kids are happy – everyone had a smile on their face. They are just like you and I when we were little, just kind of running around, playing with a football or soccer ball. They're just normal kids. I took away that we are all human and that we need to make the best of what we have or kind of strive for more. I think at the end of the trip was when we really saw that. There is so much work to be done yet.

Connor reflected he learned that small things can make a difference. He shared:

Definitely making an impact wherever you can even though it may not be that much, you're still doing something better than nothing is a good way to put it, trying to get other—people—on board with causes like that.

For him, the experience of education was closely tied to his personal experience during the service immersion trip, and it is the way in which he hopes to continue to make a difference now that he is back home in the United States. Connor shared:

Through all the service we did down there I saw the education system down there. So, I've been talking to a couple of principals and groups in [my university's community], because there are definitely some schools around here that are underserved. So, I'm going to try and get my fraternity involved with that, and [a local home-building service project].

Working in on an elementary school and interacting with children on a regular basis might have had an influence on the education thread that developed during reflective conversations about the international service immersion experience. For some participants, it was an easy way to compare and contrast with their own lived experience, and find ways to make a more significant impact, either at home in the United States or in Jamaica. Understanding the theme of the power of education helps us to understand how the planned daily curriculum and reflection opportunities influence the experience of returning home for undergraduate students.

Theme Five: Helping vs. Serving

Several of the international service immersion trip participants mentioned the theme or concept of helping versus serving. This emerged in several contexts. First, several individual participants were worried that they did not get enough accomplished during their time on the ground in Jamaica. This theme helps to answer the second research question of the study: How did the participants experience the curriculum of the service immersion experience in relationship to the personal experience of returning home. For Nicholas, he wondered what the group could have accomplished if they worked a bit harder or a bit longer, or spent less time playing with the kids and more time focused on completing the construction work. Nicholas shared:

I mean, there's part of me that was really fond of those kids and felt like we didn't do enough work. We did get a lot done, but I felt like we could have done even more had we pushed a little harder, but that's alright.

Jackson echoed some of the same feelings, and even identified that he was a bit of a ringleader of sorts in attempting to motivate the other trip participants to get more accomplished before the trip ended. He identified that he wanted to leave seeing as much completed as possible by the group. He shared:

So towards the end, one thing we all felt, and me in particular, was I wanted to get as much work done as possible, because we only had a limited amount of time left. By day five, day six, we could see the light at the end of the tunnel. We all got worried about how much we were going to get done, so we all pitched into overdrive. I was really bummed and sad to go. I wanted to stay longer. But at the same time I felt very accomplished with the amount of work we got done. I think a week is a good amount. I wish we could have stayed longer but it's not really feasible from an administrative standpoint to do a two-week trip. One week almost felt too short.

Preston connected his feelings about not making as much progress as he may have wanted to the experiences of Jamaicans on a daily basis, as they deal with the realities of frequent rain, ruined work, and needing to start over. He shared:

It was raining mostly every afternoon during our trip, because it was the rainy season. We were just concerned about our progress that we were making, but we realized things do happen. You've got to work with the progress. You've got to work with what you have. So that gives a realization of sort of connecting; what the Jamaican people have to live with and how they have to live small, and live with what they have.

Similar to the experience of Preston, Milford shared:

A big part of our leaving experience was the rain. It rained two or three of the afternoons. We had to stop work early on a couple of afternoons as well as losing some materials we made. We mixed cement for a lot of the concrete. So, the powder we poured in dissolved in the rain, so when it downpours, all that gets lost. And out of doing something where money is so vital to all, especially in Jamaica, everything is way more expensive, because you have to import it. So, losing a bag of cement is just terrible for the work that we're doing, and just the fact that we were leaving knowing that we could have done more, it's kind of hard. But it makes me want to go back if I can.

Jackson explained his learning experience related to the rain and construction in the context of learning to be more flexible. Initially, he too was frustrated by the frequent rain, but over the course of the week, learned to see the bigger picture a little bit more clearly, rather than just focusing on what wasn't going as planned. He shared:

Well, to be more flexible. That was one thing that was really important there, because it would be beautiful sunny weather one second, and then all of the sudden you would see a little cloud on the horizon and it would be pouring rain. That was very frustrating because sometimes we lost a lot of progress, like we lost two or three loads of concrete from the rain. So being flexible and persevering more, working towards that end goal kind of put things in perspective for me. Being able to look at a project that is overwhelming, projects that are huge to me don't overwhelm me anymore. I would say when we got there; there was a huge amount of work to be done. All we did was sit down, wrote it out, planned it out, and then just went to it. Each day we just knocked a little bit off. We just kept going at it. So, it was very procedural the whole thing and cool to see. By the end of it we got it all done. When we first got there, all of us were like, there's no way we're going to finish any of that. Then we finished. We actually finished ahead of schedule and lots of things we finished more than we were supposed to, which is good. Those adjustments. That's still, to this day I think, I haven't really changed back that little things don't get me as much. They still do get to me, but it puts things in perspective and I know that I shouldn't get upset over something really small.

Filip named elements of the group reflection on the concept of helping versus serving, which was a core component of the immersion trip curriculum, and was mentioned in several ways by various participants. He shared:

I didn't honestly think I would take much from it. It was definitely just a growing experience. I knew coming in we would be doing a great thing. I was centered on thinking more about myself before the trip, and after the trip, I realized I was not there for me; I was there for other people. When you're serving, they say there is a difference between serving and helping. Helping is when you feel good about yourself, because you're helping somebody who is less than you. Serving is when you are equals with each other. You're both learning from each other at the same time. I definitely learned the difference between the two. I've been striving to do more service, instead of just helping.

He was able to identify his personal transformation throughout the course of the experience as he developed awareness of those he was working with, and learning from. He hopes to share this

concept more broadly at home, and do more service instead of helping. Similar to Filip, Nicholas reflected on the difference between helping and serving. He shared:

I guess one of the biggest things, and [our group leader] did a really good job of explaining this while we were there, is that it's all about service. There is a big difference between helping people and actually serving people. Helping people implies that there's disparity there, like you get to receive my help. Whereas serving them means me being on their level and just doing out of I guess concerns, not even concerns, I don't know how she would phrase it. I think she would have hammered that home. But service is just being there for these people because they are another human being, not because I feel the need to help them because I want to be there, and help them. I don't know if that makes any sense at all.

As he summarized his thoughts on helping versus serving, and the experience of completing the work on the ground in Jamaica, Jackson shared:

The sign on the school when we drove in – the school motto is 'Hard Work Makes True Joy'. That really hit me. That really struck me because that's a mentality that isn't really struck here. You'd see it less and less in America. You'd see people who try to make a quick buck, taking shortcuts. There are not a lot of people who want to just sit down and get to work.

As he described the sign and his thoughts about the sign, he seemed to summarize the thoughts of most trip participants well. He enjoyed what he learned about the value of hard work, and hopes to carry those lessons with him as he continues to move through his undergraduate experience with his fraternity. Exploring the theme of helping versus serving helps us to understand how participants experienced the curriculum of the service immersion experience in relation to their personal experience of returning home to the United States.

Theme Six: Fraternity Connections

The participants in this study were all members of the same international fraternity which hosts the international service immersion experiences, so it was not a surprise for a theme of connection to the fraternity experience to emerge. This theme helps to answer the fifth research question of the study: How do undergraduate students make meaning of the international service

immersion experience in the months following the trip? The majority of participants who mentioned fraternity in some way tied it back to the helping/serving component. Enoch enjoyed the opportunity to meet with fraternity brothers from around the country and have a shared experience. He shared:

I was excited to get back to my chapter and get back to the U.S. and just show service everywhere that I go and try to do as much as possible to give back and having new ideas and thoughts going into what I can do the next semester and the next years, being part of a fraternity on campus and where we can go from there. I was just really excited because each night we'd sat down and had hour and a half meetings and read different articles and things like that. So, I took a lot from all the other brothers from the other chapters. I was just excited to get back really and just share and spread everything I learned and experienced.

Enoch went on to reflect about how he plans to use his international service immersion experience moving forward, and shared how he thought he could help his own fraternity chapter get involved in the process:

I want to get more involved in the local community and give back, because I know our big philanthropy is [service immersion] of course, but that's what everybody thinks. So if we get more involved, it's going to give a better name to fraternities that looked frowned upon. We're not frowned upon, but have different stereotypes and things like that. So, if we get a better name out there, and a better viewpoint of what fraternities actually do and the good things that they do, it should change a lot.

Milford has already talked with his fraternity brothers about ways that the chapter can engage more closely with the international service immersion program. He shared:

We've already talked about a couple of ways to help the [service immersion] program whether it's setting up ways that you can donate supplies. That was one of the biggest things was the amount of supplies. I don't know how much more we could have accomplished if we had another wheelbarrow, just little things like that. Getting these supplies, having just little donation things, it would be pretty easy to do, but that would help so much. So, it's really the smallest things like that.

Jackson understood the value of having the international service immersion program as the philanthropy project of the international fraternity. He enjoyed the connections he was able to

make between the money that he and his brothers raised during the academic year to the work that he participated in while he was on the ground in Jamaica. He shared:

I think we are very lucky as our fraternity to have [service immersion] as our philanthropy because it's really service and we get to personally work on it. Whereas other philanthropies are fundraisers, those other Greek organizations do raise the money and then they just hand it off to an organization or person. They never see it again. I'm sure it's going where it needs to go, but it's very different and it is way more striking when it's a fundraiser. We were raising money. I was raising money throughout the year to go to this thing and then I went. Now I see the importance of fundraising that much more. So, coming into next year I'm going to be very involved in all fundraisers, and try to get more money for it. I poured the concrete that we bought with our money. We mixed it by hand and we poured it.

For Alfredo, his experiences of fraternity connection began while he was still on the trip. He enjoyed the opportunity to brainstorm ideas with brothers from other chapters around the country, and explore ways in which he could apply what he learned on the ground in Jamaica to his chapter experience back home. Alfredo shared:

I think the hardest part of the whole trip by far was definitely as we were leaving the school. As we were piling on the bus and everybody was like, probably the last time I was going to see any of the kids. That was really hard for a lot of us. It was a pretty quiet bus ride back to the resort on the last day. So, besides like kind of sad, bummed, but everybody was very reflective I think, myself included. What we had accomplished throughout the week, the experience as a whole, because none of us had ever done anything like that. It was kind of reflective about wow, we did something cool. We learned to welcome the kids. We talked to them a lot hopefully; we wanted to kind of replicate that experience I think. This is what our last night was, we were talking about ways we can take our lessons from the trip and take it back to our chapters. I think that last 48 hours or so we were all brainstorming ideas of how we could apply what we learned on the trip and take those lessons and fly back home.

He went on to talk about his frustration with his own fraternity brothers in his chapter, and his wish that they could all participate in the international service immersion program in hopes of creating a positive change in the chapter. Alfredo shared:

Ok, this might be a little off topic, but there is definitely a stigma against like typical frat guys like the partying, and that kind of thing. Because we are the organization that has, I don't know, how many chapters, but we have chapters all across our country, hundreds of guys in each chapter. We have a group that's really capable of doing a lot, really trying to

make change. That kind of stuff. Right now, in my chapter, I feel like I don't really think they have what it takes to change. So, I want to take that message back to my chapter that you are able to make a difference, just take that little jump and actually put yourself out there and make that change.

Stuart connected his time in Jamaica to his role as a fraternity man on his campus, and how he is implementing small life changes in order to hopefully create some change in others around him. He felt strongly that he would not have made these personal changes if it were not for the connection he felt to his fraternity and the international service immersion experience. He shared:

I've been trying to wake up earlier even though not at 7:00 a.m. Last summer I used to sleep till like 1:00 or 2:00 [p.m.] every day. Now I try and get up around 9:00 or 10:00 [a.m.], just because I feel like if I don't do that, I feel like I just wasted the whole day. Also, I try to stay super active. Just no regrets really, while we were in Jamaica I tried to step out of my comfort zone a lot more. Now I try and do that here as well. I wouldn't be doing that if I hadn't gone to Jamaica and hadn't participated in [this service experience].

Stuart feels as though his experience will have a positive influence on his fraternity brothers when they all return to campus this fall. Exploring the theme of fraternity connections helps us to understand how undergraduate students made meaning of their international service immersion experience in the months following their trip.

Research Questions

While all questions were answered in each interview, each question was not specifically asked of each participant, as is not the intent of research questions.

What Are The Experiences of Undergraduate Students as They Leave the Country of Service at the Conclusion of Their International Service Immersion Trip?

Study participants shared about the difficulty of leaving the children behind in Jamaica. They shared about the ability to explore poverty while on the ground in Jamaica, and how they believe the experience will have a lasting influence on their lives. The emergent theme of

exploring privilege also helps to answer this question. Connor summarized his experience stating:

Honestly, I thought it would just be a cool experience personally to go see what life was like down there, to make a little bit of an impact. Yeah, I didn't expect that big of changes, but it turns out I got some pretty valuable lessons out of it.

For Filip, he spoke about the process of bringing the trip experience back home, and how he made meaning of that opportunity once he returned to the United States:

You can bring a lot of this service back home; take it home with you to America. I just kind of took away that we are all human and that we need to make the best of what we have or kind of strive for more. I knew coming in it would be a great thing that you're doing. You need to feel great about yourself.

Nicholas was more matter-of-fact about his experience of returning home, sharing that he'd expected to do a lot of work while he was on the ground in Jamaica, and that his experience mirrored those expectations. He seemed to be a bit surprised by the amount of fun he had on the trip in the process. In his own words, Nicholas said:

I expected to do a lot of work. I think we did do a fair amount of work. I wasn't expecting to have as much fun as I did. That was probably the most unexpected part. But everything that I expected—I don't know, I was expecting a lot of work, and not much downtime. But that was ultimately, I mean, I had a blast.

Stuart spoke about the challenge of leaving the children at the school, and the influence it had on his process of returning home to the United States. He was visibly frustrated with the dichotomy between children in Jamaica and children he knows in the United States. At other parts of our conversation, Stuart also talked about his own privilege, which seems to underlie his comments here:

It was heartbreaking leaving the kids at the school. Just playing with the kids all week, and just running around the school, and everything. I had a bunch of connections with the kids. I got some of their phone numbers actually and still keep in contact with one of them. They're always texting me like, "Come back, come back." They're all like, "when are you coming back?" I don't know. It's crazy how happy the kids were. Here in America kids have everything. They have multiple gaming systems. They've got the

Xbox. They've got the PS4. They've got every toy they could possibly imagine. They're little brats and they're miserable and always complaining. These kids have absolutely nothing and they're just like the happiest kids I've ever seen. The last day we brought some soccer balls, brought a bunch of T-shirts and stuff. That was awesome. They do this big thank you, and sang us a couple of songs. That was awesome.

After the international service immersion experience ended, Stuart stayed in Jamaica for a few days on his own. I believe that experience had an influence on his process of returning home as well.

How Did the Participants Experience the Curriculum of the Service Immersion Experience in Relationship to Their Personal Experience of Returning Home?

Several trip participants shared direct connections or reflection about the planned curriculum of the experience during interview conversations. The most salient theme connected to the trip curriculum was the discussion of the difference between helping and serving, which emerged as a theme in the research. Several immersion trip participants mentioned wanting to share this message with their peers when they returned to school in the fall.

For Wayland, he tied his experience of the service immersion trip curriculum to his own lessons about privilege, which played out for him in several ways. He shared:

First of all, I tried not to have a stereotype. I think many people who went there actually thought about what Jamaica would be, maybe the illiterate, their safety and the GDP, or all the economic things. But I didn't actually do it on purpose, just because I wanted to know without any stereotypes. Lessons, I think again probably, I have so many privileges. Also, I think I realized how much freedom I have compared to the people in Jamaica. That's one of the privileges.

For Nicholas, the process of returning home was a bit sad. He shared that the children were a central part of the experience and reflection for him:

A little sad. I mean there's part of me that was really fond of those kids and felt like we didn't do enough work. We did get a lot done, but I felt like we could have done even more had we pushed a little harder, but that's alright.

Enoch talked about the international service immersion experience as the best mission trip that he had experienced. He struggled a bit with the experience of tourists in Jamaica, and how other individuals could visit the same places he did, without ever experiencing the same poverty and other opportunities he had while he was on the ground in Jamaica. Enoch shared:

I told my friends and family it was one of the best mission trips I've gone on, because when I'm on other mission trips—I've been to New York and several other trips all over the United States—but I guess it's because I actually knew people, whereas here I was thrown into, and I was completely, I didn't really know anybody but it was just totally different. But I really enjoyed it, that's what I told them. I told them all the things we did. One thing that I really mentioned is how like we saw the sands on the beaches resorts and things like that. They had their own landing strip for the tourists and the visitors to just literally just get right off the airplane and just go straight over to the resort, walk right across the street. So that way visitors didn't have to see what an actual country is like, and the situations they're going through.

The process of returning home and exploring the influence of the international service immersion curriculum is different for each student participant. However, it was clear through the participant experiences that not a single participant was unaffected by the experience of the international service immersion trip.

How Do the Planned Daily Curriculum and Reflection Opportunities Included in an International Service Immersion Trip Influence the Experience of Returning Home for Undergraduate Students?

The emergent themes of exploring poverty and exploring privilege as well as the power of education theme are evidence of the planned daily curriculum and reflection opportunities. Two participants mentioned direct connections to the reflection curriculum, and experiences they shared upon returning home to the United States.

Wayland talked about the connection between serving and helping, and how that has influenced his perception of service since returning to the United States. He shared:

So, the main thing, the first day we talked about the difference between our service and helping. We did not help because something is broken, or we want to help. We do it because it is holy. Do it for ourselves. That's something I will always keep in mind if I do something like service for a lot of people. I did not do it to help people, but everything is going to come back to me. There are only like in my mind, but the way I do about the service trip, service is actually changing. I will do it for myself.

For Filip, his experiences with the children on the ground in Jamaica deeply influenced his experience of returning home, and the work he plans to continue now that he is back in the United States:

I also want to just keep on mentoring, and being part of organizations on campus that are very service oriented. I didn't honestly think I would take much from it. It was definitely just a growing experience.

Milford spoke about the difficulty of leaving Jamaica, especially as it related to saying goodbye to the children that he worked with at the school. He said he carries those images with him, and those are what he thinks of most as he reflects on his international service immersion experience. He shared:

Saying bye to the kids was challenging because they all wanted us to stay just as much as we wanted to stay.

It is clear through conversations with each of the international service immersion participants that the planned curriculum and reflection of the experience had both explicit and implicit influences on their process of returning home to the United States.

What are the Experiences of Undergraduate Students During Their First Month Back in the United States Following an International Service Immersion Trip?

Trip participants shared experiences related to sharing information about the international service immersion trip with their friends and family. For some trip participants, this was easy, and they were excited to share about their experiences in Jamaica. For other trip participants, this was more difficult, and they struggled to find the words and emotions to share about their

international service immersion experience. The theme of global citizenship ties most closely to this sub-question.

For Alfredo, he looked at his own behaviors when he returned to the United States, as well as the behaviors of those around him and of his community. He seemed a bit sad to share that he has begun to slip back into some old habits, but also that this reflection was helpful for him to re-consider some of his learning from the international service immersion experience. He shared:

Behavior-wise, when I got back I just looked at everything. We can get like the issue, community kind of thing, like every issue that I saw in the community, and like in general I was thinking of a way it could be fixed, which kind of tapered off now that I've gotten back into regular life unfortunately.

Milford found the process of returning home to the United States to be fairly easy. He talked about the experience in many conversations with family and friends, especially initially after returning home. He feels as though he can relate more to some experiences of others into his community because of the experiences he had while he was in Jamaica. Milford shared:

It wasn't that big of a deal. I noticed I talked about it a lot more and that came it came up in more, not the daily conversations about like going to Jamaica but just the things I learned there would constantly, I realized, oh, I can relate to that because of this experience. I didn't really think about that actually having that big of an impact and it really has.

Jackson felt as though he'd had an amazing experience. He was pleased with the blend of curriculum and reflection, and shared:

I thought it was an amazing experience in every sense of the word. I'd say they did a good job of putting us in with the kids, but at the same time it was a kind of volunteering tourism trip. We did get to see parts of Jamaica and have some fun on the trip. It was definitely a service trip. We were there to serve and try to help or try to make those kids lives better through service. So, that's basically what I focused on. I was very clear to my friends and family about that. Most would ask me like, "How was Jamaica?" They thought I was having fun. I told them I was working manual labor, eight hours a day. When we weren't working we were usually driving. There was a little fun here and there,

but I tried to make it very clear that it was not a vacation. It was definitely a job. It was a service trip, it was work. I told everyone to go.

Each international service immersion trip participant had unique experiences during their first month back in the United States. For some, they found the process of sharing their stories and reflecting with others to be fairly easy. For others, it was more difficult to initially make meaning of their experience and share that meaning with others. For all, they found the international service immersion experience influencing their life in some way.

How do Undergraduate Students Make Meaning of the International Service Immersion Experience in the Months Following the Trip?

Similar to the first month after returning from the international service immersion trip, each participant experienced the months following the trip in their own ways.

For Filip, he found that he was taking more away from the international service immersion experience than he thought he would. He shared:

But many of my expectations came to be, but also there's so much more that I've learned from it as well. I just learned so much more that I didn't expect to. I took away way more from the project than I thought I actually would.

Enoch reflected his experiences during the summer months might be different than the ways in which he will make meaning of the international service immersion experience after returning to campus for the fall semester. Enoch shared:

It's definitely going to change when we get back at home or when I start school really. We're going to try to get more involved. Last semester and over the past, I'm freshly initiated into the chapter; I was initiated in the spring, so I've only been in it for a semester. But I'll have new thoughts and things I'm taking back to the chapter. It's not just about [the service immersion program]. I know [the service immersion program] is important but also our local community as well. So, we want to get more involved in like the local food bank and the Red Cross and different things like that.

Stuart finds himself missing the people and the culture of Jamaica. He also reflected on the role that service plays in his life, and how that has shifted as a result of his participation in the international service immersion experience. Stuart shared:

I definitely miss Jamaica. That will definitely not be the last time I go to Jamaica. I definitely want to do more service trips in my life, whether it be in Jamaica or not but it definitely opened my eyes to what good I can do. I don't really like doing community service all that much. I don't pick up trash. That's not really my forte I guess in the service community. But I would love to do more projects like this. But, I came back, and I did some more volunteer work for my church like this festival which we do every year.

Preston related his experiences in the months following the international service immersion trip to the plans he has for his chapter when he returns to campus in the fall. He has spent some of his time in the summer months following the international service immersion trip planning and preparing for chapter activities this fall. Preston shared:

Our chapter has this plan we were going to have. It's called Kids Fruit Basket, where they deliver sack lunches to underprivileged schools in the area. That was definitely something that I could see working with that, and just sort of bringing back what I learned to this community. I've done a lot of planning about that already this summer.

Many of the trip participants mentioned various ways in which they hope to carry the trip experience forward with them into the next academic year when they return to their fraternity chapters and campus communities.

The emergent themes of exploring poverty, exploring privilege, global citizenship, power of education, helping versus serving, and fraternity connections are representative of the experience of immersion trip participants. Each participant told rich stories of their time on the ground in Jamaica and their interaction with the Jamaican people. And each mentioned, to varying degrees, the difficulty of returning home after the international service immersion experience. It should be noted that trip participants felt that the curriculum of the trip prepared them for the process of returning home, but that did not make the experience less real.

Many study participants indicated that they wished that all of the undergraduate members of their fraternity chapter had the opportunity to participate in this experience, for several reasons. First, they thought it would be easier for them to create lasting change within their own chapter if they were working from a shared experience. Second, several participants felt that having individuals nearby who had participated in the same experience would have made the process of returning home slightly easier.

Essence

The essence of the international service immersion experience and the process of returning home to the United States is community, in many forms. Learning more about personal power and privilege, education, and the global community all contribute to the overall experience. The international service immersion participants took their newly formed perceptions and understanding of community with them as they move forward. International service immersion trip participants explore poverty, privilege, and education in new and different ways in their local community. International service immersion participants viewed local, regional, national, and international communities in a new light as a result of their participation in the immersion trip experience, a stop on their path to becoming fuller citizens of the global community.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore experiences of undergraduate students after completing a short term (one week) international service immersion trip to better understand the phenomena of this experience and the learning experiences of undergraduate students who participate in international services immersion. For this study, the overarching research question was: What was the experience of undergraduate students upon their return from an international

service immersion trip? As the stories of the students who participated in the international service immersion experience show, the students had a powerful experience, learned about the local community, and each worked through the re-integration process into the United States in their own way. Several student participants were very open about the struggles they had coming back to a culture of “more” in the United States. The opportunity to experience one’s privilege and consider opportunities one has that others in other parts of the world might not be able to enjoy was powerful for the student immersion trip participants. The emergent themes of exploring poverty, exploring privilege, global citizenship, the power of education, helping versus serving, and connections to the fraternity experience all help lead to the understanding of the experience of international service immersion participants.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study explored the experiences of undergraduate students who participated in an international service immersion trip. Short term study abroad programs, such as the international service immersion experience explored in this study, are now more popular than traditional semester long study abroad programs for undergraduate students (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). A gap in the research exists around understanding student experiences post participation in an international service immersion trip. The literature base and research around medical professional trips (nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and pre-medical studies) continues to grow, but the broad based literature around service immersion for general student populations is growing much more slowly, even over the four years of research and writing for this study.

In 1933, Dewey defined reflective thinking as, “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it” (p. 9). Reflective thinking lies at the center of the international service immersion experience for undergraduate students. In 1938, Dewey went on to pose the question, “How is it that experiences are educative?” (p. 25). Dewey’s assertions are interesting to consider in the context of the international service immersion experience especially as they relate to the power of reflection as a central part of the educational experience of international service immersion. This chapter reviews the overall study, reveals key findings and emergent themes in the study, implications for practitioners and organizations who lead international service immersion experiences, and opportunities for future research related to international service immersion experiences.

Key Findings and Emergent Themes

This section discusses the key findings and emergent themes of the present study, and how they related to the research questions of the study as well as literature past research.

Exploring Poverty

Several of the participants in this study mentioned their international service immersion experience was the first time that they had truly experienced stark poverty. For one, it was because he grew up in a wealthy community, and went to college in a wealthy college town. He genuinely struggled with the things he saw while he was in Jamaica, and I could sense his uncomfortableness when he was talking about being approached by individuals selling wares (and drugs). Several participants grappled with concepts of experiencing poverty firsthand on the ground in Jamaica, the stark contrast of poverty in Jamaica, and the experience of returning home, and trying to make meaning of experiences of poverty at home. Participants struggled to identify areas in their own home communities where poverty and wealth were juxtaposed in the way they found them to be in Jamaica. As Boyle, Nackerud, and Kilpatrick (1999) found, when students come into close contact and have a shared experience with people from other cultures, they are likely to have reduced levels of ethnocentrism. Boyle et al. (1999) also found students are more likely to leave an international service immersion experience with more questions than answers, which seemed to hold very true in the present study.

Exploring Privilege

For the undergraduate student participants in the international service immersion experience, it was hard for many to explore poverty without also exploring their own privilege. This occurred both during the time in Jamaica and after the participants returned home to the United States. It also occurred in a variety of ways. For some participants, this became evident

as they developed relationships with individuals they met on the ground during their time in Jamaica. Savard (2012) wrote about the crux of the immersion experience being the immersion itself – giving students the opportunity to experience the poverty and lack of resources that afflict much of the world. The Jesuits call this being “ruined for life”. The opportunity to explore and grapple with one’s own privilege is an opportunity that will stick with these students for the rest of their lives, in some form. Although they are only several months past their international immersion experience at this point, it is clear from conversations that the trip will not soon be forgotten. For other participants, this occurred when they returned to their home communities in the United States, and began to understand and process the stark contrasts between the communities where they lived or worked and the communities in which they lived and served in Jamaica. These findings are similar to those of Kelly (2011) who asserted international service immersion requires students to confront the reality that universal human problems exist which demand collaboration and solidarity. This theme relates to the work of Kelly and others on moral and ethical development as a result of participation in an international service immersion experience.

Global Citizenship

For several international service immersion trip participants, the themes of poverty and privilege went one step further as individuals considered their own roles as global citizens, and the responsibilities that come along with that role in an evolving global society. Nam (2011) concluded critical reflection is an integral part of any service immersion experience. As the participants in this study reflected on their experience and shared their stories, they spoke about increasing understanding of the global world, and the role that they could play, both on their own campus/in their local community, and in the larger world as they finished undergraduate studies.

For one participant who had never left the United States before, the experience of being immersed in and understanding another culture was powerful, leaving a lasting impression on his outlook of the world, and his role as a global citizen.

Crabtree (2008) found students who participated in international service immersion experiences moved from a charity orientation to a more social justice focused orientation, which is consistent with the experiences of the participants in this study. One participant mentioned participating in a number of philanthropy activities on his campus prior to his participation in the international service immersion experience. After participating in the international service immersion experience, he felt that he was more interested in project and cause based service in which he could see an impact in his local community.

Power of Education

Several international service immersion trip participants mentioned the ties between their participation in the immersion trip and developing a greater understanding of the role of education in developing a society. This is consistent with Dupre's 2010 research findings about students learning more about the global world beyond their campus walls. One participant identified that as Americans, growing up in middle class suburbs, attending public or private schools, and then going on to university education, it is sometimes hard to understand inequities in the education system. For trip participants, the reality that inequities exist around the world, and also in our own backyard, was increasingly apparent. During their time on the ground in Jamaica, the trip participants began to better understand the vast differences in our educational systems around the world. The trip participants bring this knowledge and understanding with them back to their home communities, and it can help frame their perspectives about local and global education for the rest of their life.

A few trip participants returned with intentions to focus some of their service work in the United States on issues related to education. This is a powerful outcome of the immersion trip participation.

Helping Versus Serving

Several of the international service immersion trip participants mentioned the theme or concept of helping versus serving, and how they explored and reflected on this concept both during their time in Jamaica and after they returned home to the United States. This emerged in several contexts. First, several individual participants were worried they did not get enough accomplished during their time on the ground in Jamaica. They felt like they could have spent more time doing actual hands on work, versus the time they spent in the community; learning about the community and the culture and interacting with the people.

For a few other participants, they shared through their stories that although they thought going into the experience that they wanted to get a lot of work done during their time in Jamaica, they realized as the week went on, that the experience of working with the Jamaicans was more powerful. They also learned a fair amount about Jamaican culture in the process. Kiely (2005) noted students “working alongside Nicaraguans and sharing their stories helped to transform their sense of moral obligation into seeing the importance of building solidarity with the poor” (p. 13). At the end of the international service immersion experience, the trip participants were able to conclude that it wasn’t the amount of work that was accomplished or the hours they spent working that mattered most but rather it was the quality of time. Working alongside the Jamaicans and building skills and community together can be beneficial to the local community even after the immersion trip participants return home.

Fraternity Connections

The participants in this study were all members of the same international fraternity which hosts the international service immersion experiences, so it was not a surprise for a theme of connection to the fraternity experience to emerge. The majority of participants who mentioned fraternity in some way tied it back to the helping/serving component. Enoch enjoyed the opportunity to meet with fraternity brothers from around the country and have a shared experience.

The idea of creating a shared experience around service provides a powerful connection to the mission and core values of many fraternal organizations. The ability to bring members together for an international service immersion experience is profound, and also not possible for every fraternal organization. However, organizations can (and I would assert should) help their members to achieve some of the same outcomes at home

Implications for Future Practice

As educators, we have a responsibility to our students to help them understand poverty is not just something that happens in a developing country. It happens at home. In our own community. And it is easy to ignore if we let ourselves. For practitioners and organizers who arrange international service immersion experiences, the experiences of student participants in this study highlight the importance of curriculum and reflection on the international service immersion experience with encountering poverty in new ways.

As higher education evolves to meet the needs of our evolving world, student affairs educators must take a more active role in preparing students to be global citizens. International service immersion experiences are a great tool by which we can foster this growth and learning, but we clearly know that it is unrealistic to think that every undergraduate student would have

the opportunity to participate in a study abroad or international service immersion experience during their time in undergraduate education. Astin and Sax (1998) identified participation in service during undergraduate studies increases a student's civic responsibility. In the present study, this can be compared to the emergent themes of exploring poverty, exploring privilege, and understanding the power of education. Each of these themes challenges the student participants to think more critically about their own home community. Perhaps as educators, we should begin to turn more focus to service opportunities in our own communities, which are far more accessible than international service experiences.

It is easy for student affairs educators with similar backgrounds as the trip participants in this study to forget that not all of our students come from middle class neighborhoods, with decent schools, and access to good teachers and resources. The experiences and reflections of the undergraduate student participants in this study are valuable lessons for all educators – how are we learning more about the education systems in our own backyards, and in what ways are we using our influence and position to create positive change?

The concept of helping versus serving does not just exist in the international service immersion context. As student affairs educators, we have an opportunity to help undergraduate students explore and understand this concept in many ways, within our own campuses and communities. The reflections of the international service immersion participants serve as a powerful guide for us in creating these opportunities for all students at home. Leaving undergraduate education with an understanding and appreciation for the difference between helping and serving would generate a more compassionate work force, on their way to becoming more global citizens.

Fraternity and sorority members can explore the concepts of poverty and privilege in many ways in their own home communities. They could serve together in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter, or organize a “sleep out” event to better understand homelessness in their own community. Members could work in under-resourced school to understand some of the challenges of education inequities in our own communities. Members could interact with exchange students from other countries and share stories about traditions, cultures, and customs in each community to learn more about global citizenship. There are a myriad ways in which global citizenship could be further infused into the fraternity/sorority membership experience. It is time for the fraternal community to more fully adopt these practices, and provide these opportunities for members.

Fraternity can and should do better in these regards. The organization that participated in this study and several others are leading the charge. It is time for the rest to step up and begin to infuse some of these important curricular opportunities in to member growth and development programs.

Future Research

Many opportunities exist for further research exploring the experience of undergraduate student participants in international service immersion trips. Further research on international immersion trip preparation, international immersion trip curriculum and reflection, and international immersion trip conclusion and the experience of returning home would all be valuable additions to the literature. Additionally, a more longitudinal study looking at the experiences of international service immersion trip participants, five, ten, even twenty years out from their experience would tell us more about the true value of the experience for the participant. More comprehensive research, looking at the similarities and differences between

programs offered by both academic institutions and academically related organizations is necessary. There is a huge body of information available, and certainly appears daunting to research, however, if we are ever going to truly compare programs and trips, it is necessary.

International Immersion Trip Preparation

Further research and study in this area could lead to the development of promising practices, which will aid practitioners who are preparing students for international immersion. Future research could also explore immersion trip curriculum, and identify best practices. These best practices then could be adapted by academic institutions and academically related organizations to fit the needs of their own international service immersion programs.

International Immersion Trip Curriculum and Reflection

Future research on the curriculum and reflection of international service immersion experiences should be broad based. Researchers could explore multiple curriculum models and do a comparative analysis. Case study research could be developed looking at the experiences of student participants in various programs. Faculty and trip facilitators could be interviewed for an interpretive phenomenological analysis research study. Student trip evaluations could be compared and explored for further details about student perceptions of their trip experiences, and the value of the curriculum aspects of the experiences.

International Immersion Trip Conclusion and the Experience of Returning Home

This study explored the experiences of student participants as an international service immersion experience concluded and the students returned home to the United States. However, this study was limited in that it looked at the experiences of student participants in just one trip program, conducted by an academically related organization. Future studies could include multiple academic institutions and academically related organizations, and compare the

experiences of student participants in multiple programs. The process of returning home is different for each undergraduate student participant, and can be complicated when trip participants are from a variety of academic institutions. When the trip is over, they do not return to the same home base. It is important to pay special attention to the post trip communication, check in process, and reflection opportunity for all student participants. Additional future research could explore ways in which students connect and process experience virtually – both through electronic check in mechanisms and social media reflection opportunities.

Longitudinal Study of Immersion Trip Experience

To date, very little research exists about the longitudinal experience of undergraduate students who participate in international service immersion opportunities. Most of the post-experience research focuses on the experience of students within a few months or few years of their international immersion experience. A more comprehensive longitudinal study tracking international service immersion participants from a variety of programs over a longer period of time would provide an interesting addition to the body of literature and research. This would also help us understand the longer term influence of the international immersion on the student participants.

Summary

As Highum (2014) states, “College students are entering a world where understanding and navigating linguistic and cultural differences are essential. Global – not national- is our new economic paradigm” (p. 33). The opportunity to participate in an international service immersion experience can be an educational and transformative experience for undergraduate student participants. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of student participants, particularly at the end of their immersion experience, and after they returned home to the United

States. The ten participants in this study shared powerful and rich stories of their experiences during their time on the ground in Jamaica, as well as after they returned home. Each participant shared overwhelming enthusiasm for the experience in his own way, and I am sure this experience will live on in each of the individual participants for some time to come. This study has provided evidence that participation in international service immersion experiences can change perspectives of undergraduate student participants in the short term, as they return home to the United States and their campus communities.

The face of higher education in the United States is rapidly changing, and one of the many ways to prepare our undergraduate students for the global world they are entering is to give them a taste of that world through international service immersion. It is not realistic to think all undergraduate students could participate in an international service immersion experience during their time in college. However, if we continue to improve the experience for those who do have the opportunity to participate, we will also improve their ability to share and articulate that experience with peers upon returning home. As practitioners, we must continue to invest time, energy, and effort into pre-trip preparation programs for student participants. We must refine and continue to improve our trip curriculum and reflection components, coupled with strong cultural immersion components and opportunities to meet and walk with individuals in the communities we are visiting. And we must prepare our undergraduate student participants for their return home. In the fraternal world, student leaders often leave their chapter or campus environment for “immersion learning” at chapter officer training, convention, or a leadership academy. Just as we prepare those students to return to their communities and become agents of change, so must we prepare students who are returning from international service immersion experiences in the name of fraternity. Our communities will only be stronger as a result.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Why did you choose to participate in an international service immersion experience?
2. What, if any, apprehensions/concerns did you have leading up to your international service immersion experience?
3. What were your expectations for the international service immersion experience?
4. What did you experience in your first 48 hours on the ground during your international service immersion experience?
5. As your international service immersion experience drew to a close, what feelings did you experience?
6. Did you experience any challenges when you returned to your home country? If so, how?
7. How did you describe your international service immersion experience to your friends and family?
8. Did you immediately change any habits upon returning to your home country? If so, what? How long did these changes last?
9. What lessons and reflections stick with you today?
10. Did your international service immersion experience prompt other service activities or experiences at home?
11. Do you plan to participate in any additional international service immersion experiences?
12. Do you have any additional comments about your international service immersion experience you would like to share?

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date

Dear <insert first name>,

I'm writing today to invite you to participate in a study being conducted at Colorado State University. You are receiving this invitation because of your recent participation in a Project Jamaica Trip through Delta Upsilon International Fraternity. The title of the study is, "**Experiences of Undergraduate Students as a Result of Participation in an International Service Immersion Trip**".

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of undergraduate students after completing a short term international service immersion trip. Additionally, the study will explore the experience of returning home to the United States after completing an international service immersion trip, and the feelings and emotions undergraduate students might experience as a result of international service immersion.

Video conference interviews will be scheduled with participants. Interviews will be conducted in two stages. In the month immediately following the international service immersion trip, participants will be interviewed to learn more about their experience on the immersion trip, leaving the country of service, and returning home. A second interview will be scheduled with each participant three months after their service immersion experience has concluded. The total time commitment is two hours.

You should only participate in this research if you are at least 18 years old and are currently enrolled at an institution of higher education in the United States, and participated in an international service immersion experience through Project Jamaica. The researchers are recruiting up to fifteen students for the study based on diversity of individuals and institution. Your participation in this research is voluntary.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact me, Tricia Fechter at triciafechter@gmail.com or 970-231-0295. Additionally, my advisor is:

Linda Kuk, Position: Associate Professor
Chair - Community College Leadership Specialization
Chair - College and University Leadership Specialization
Office Telephone: (970) 491-7243
Email: linda.kuk@colostate.edu

I hope you are interested in participating! If so, I will send you a consent form to review, and then we can schedule your first interview. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,
Tricia Fechter