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Organizations' Perception of Service-Learning Study Abroad Programs and Transformational Partnerships

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Global education is becoming increasingly important in higher education institutions in the United States. Concurrently, service-learning is another educational activity becoming more popular in higher education institutions. Very little research has been done on the impact on the community from a service-learning perspective, especially as a part of a study abroad. The purpose of this study was to explore the impacts of a short-term service-learning study abroad program on the community partners (organizations) where students completed service-learning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders of organizations in Ireland who hosted students from the University of Florida during a study abroad program. Data were interpreted using Enos and Morton's (2003) campus and community partnerships framework. Results revealed both transactional and transformational outcomes. Long-term impacts included cultural exchanges, the skill level of students, and moving partnerships forward. Recommendations for practice and research are provided.

Keywords: study abroad, service-learning, community, organizations, impact, Ireland

Introduction

Global education is becoming increasingly important in higher education institutions in the United States. Hovland (2009) said that global education is valuable for helping students learn about diversity, identity, citizenship, interconnection, and responsible action. Higher education institutions are using global education to integrate multidisciplinary perspectives, enhance civic engagement, explore diversity, and understand global issues (Hovland, 2009). One small piece of global learning is the act of studying abroad. Study abroad programs play an important part in higher education, as does understanding how students change and grow after participating in a study abroad (Redwine et al., 2018). Studying abroad can impact students' academic achievement, language development, intercultural communication, and career choices (Dwyer, 2004).

Service-learning is another educational activity becoming more popular in higher education institutions. Students often come to the university with social consciousness and a desire to make a difference (Dunkel et al., 2011). Students want to make a difference on issues like poverty, equity, and sustainability (Dunkel et al., 2011). For students, service-learning goes beyond volunteering one's time, but rather how service-learning can impact them and the community around them.

Many faculty of short-term (6 weeks or less) study abroad programs are now incorporating service-learning into their programs after seeing a need for it. Incorporating service learning into a study abroad program is a way to complement and expand on the learning outcomes (Kiely, 2010). It could be a course designed as a separate component of a study abroad program. Or, for some faculty, it could be seen as an add-on to the existing coursework. Regardless of the viewpoint of the faculty towards service learning, it rests on the faculty to conduct a meaningful experience for the student.

Another important aspect to understand is the student's desire to go on a service-learning study abroad program. What is leading a student to go on a program such as this? Is it because of their upbringing, their current major, or their desire to "do good" (Grusky, 2000)? Furthermore, do students participating in such programs truly understand the concept behind service-learning and what that entails? By knowing the motivations and perceptions behind a student's desire to attend such a program, we can further tailor programs to help students transform their way of thinking.

Lastly, and some might consider most importantly, the community perspective is the crux of all service-learning (Kiely & Nielsen, 2003). When service-learners go into a community that they are unfamiliar with, are they successful in their ventures? What are the community's thoughts and perceptions of the student being there? How is the service from the student impacting them? Not much research has been completed in terms of the community impact of service-learning and how the community feels about having outsiders complete such projects. This research attempts to understand the community perspective of such programs

Very little research has been done on the impact on the community from a service-learning perspective. The community aspect seems to be an afterthought within most research focused on service learning.

Theoretical Framework

In their chapter titled "Developing a Theory and Practice of Campus-Community Partnerships," Enos and Morton (2003) stated that to be fully committed to service-learning, programs should have authentic partners and be deeply integrated with the communities in which they work. From Enos and Morton's perspective, university and community partners should realize they are members of the same community with shared resources, problems, and issues. While Enos and

Morton present their theory of transformational relationships in a domestic setting, the argument also holds true for an international setting.

Regardless of where the partnership is happening, Enos and Morton (2003) say that community partnerships should move from transactional to transformational. Transactional partnerships are focused on tasks and operate within current structures. No change is expected. In contrast, transformational partnerships often have less structure, are open to unanticipated outcomes, and have deeper levels of commitment. Enos and Morton acknowledge that it is difficult to predict how partnerships will evolve, but in transformational partnerships, the unpredictability is viewed as exciting, full of promise, and worthy of nurturing.

Enos and Morton (2003) signified two ways partnerships could be transformational. While they discuss one-time events and projects as well as short-term placements, they emphasize that these types of service-learning actions are transactional and not transformational. The first transformational act is that of ongoing placements and mutual dependence. These are sustained over time so that the cost of campus-community partnerships decreases without the loss of benefit to the parties involved. By both the campus and community investing time and resources into a partnership, the potential for significant learning is created as partners describe their common experiences to one another, discuss what their experiences mean, and arrive at provisional conclusions that allow them to strategize, plan next steps, and develop their capacity to carry out those steps. Transformation becomes a possible, if not sought-after, outcome as the partners begin to challenge their initial assumption that the community is the domain of the problem and the campus the domain of the solution and examine the possibility that they share a common domain.

The second way Enos and Morton (2003) emphasized transformational partnerships was that of core partnerships. Core partnerships deepen the energy and synergy of ongoing placements. Interpersonal relations between people are strengthened. Partners move from mutual dependence to interdependence.

Enos and Morton (2003) acknowledged that transformative partnerships might not evolve from other types of partnerships. Rather, they occur with partners realizing that their combined efforts will transform their respective organizations. The influence of transformative partnerships goes beyond just the partners and has impacts on other organizations and the community at large.

Literature Review

In a case study focused on transformational partnerships between universities in Australia, Butcher et al. (2011) determined that five areas are needed for a truly transformational partnership: working out of a shared purpose, leading collaboratively, relating based on trust, ensuring appropriate and adequate resources, and remaining open to learning and change. Further, that shared purpose must be embedded at all levels.

Bringle et al. (2009) stated that a partnership is a pervasive term. They stated that this term is used in contrast to placement within service-learning. The assumption is that the partner in partnerships is a community partner. The authors argue that the word “partner” does not accurately reflect who that partner actually is. Based on this concept, the Students, Organizations in the community, Faculty, Administrators on campus, and Residents in the community (SOFAR) was developed. Within these five categories, they established ten relationships, each of which has two vectors of direction for the relationship.

In contrast, Clayton et al. (2010) stated that *relationship* and *partnership* are not interchangeable terms. Rather, the term relationship is used to describe vast characteristics, such as short-term or long-term, formal or informal, and simple or complex. They focus on the use of partnerships. Their main question is whether transactional and transformational relationships within service-learning can be meaningfully measured. Ultimately, they developed the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale. They based the initial version on Enos and Morton’s (2003) view of transformational partnerships. This original figure was a linear model ranging from 1 (*transactional*) to 10 (*transformational*; Clayton et al., 2010). They determined that the transactional partnership was short-term, project-based, and limited to planned commitments. Within these partnerships, the partners work within systems, maintain separate identities, and accept institutional goals. While transformational partnerships are long-term or indefinite, issue-based, dynamic, and open commitments create new systems, create group identity, and critically examine goals. Furthermore, they created nine attributes for the scale. These attributes were: outcomes, common goals, decision-making, resources, conflict management, identity formation, power, significance, and satisfaction (Clayton et al., 2010).

While the literature discusses the concept and movement from transactional to transformational partnership, it does not discuss how to do so. The literature is also limited in terms of the amount of research that is being done on transformational partnerships. More so, research is lacking on the impact on the organization that service-learning has. The research contained in this dissertation aims to add to the limited body of knowledge in this area.

Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to explore the impacts of a short-term service-learning study abroad program on the community partners (organizations) where students completed service-learning.

Methodology

The scope of this research focused on the organizations that were used during a study abroad program that was service-learning based. This program, University of Florida in Galway and Gweedore: Youth Development, Service-Learning, and Irish Culture, ran for six weeks. This program was selected due to its nature of being a predominately service-learning program.

Nineteen students were selected to go on the program through an application process that included an online application, deposit, academic advisor approval, and an interview with the faculty director.

Students were placed at five different organizations to complete individual placements for the first four weeks of the program. The last two weeks were completed as a group at one organization.

Organizations

While in Galway, students were placed at various organizations to focus on youth development. Organization 1 is an after-school and youth club for children and young people in the Bohermore area of Galway. The population of this part of the city is predominately made up of the traveler community. This population was once referred to as gypsies. Two students were placed here to help with the summer day camp. Each week, a different age group participated in the day camp. Students assisted and took directions from the camp director but were also limited due to the nature of the community.

Organization 2 is a family-founded organization supporting children with autism and their families. Students were assistants during the summer camp and were able to design and implement ideas within the summer camp. Students were partnered one-on-one with the camp participants. Seven students were placed at Organization 2.

Two students were placed at Organization 3, which focused on youth homelessness and prevention. The students were tasked with assisting the organization and helping clients with learning life skills.

Organization 4 is a former hotel turned residence where immigrants claiming asylum in Ireland are housed until their immigration status has been determined. Seven students conducted services here. Students were tasked with holding a morning summer camp for the children of the refugee center. The day camp ran from 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday.

Organization 5 was a center located approximately an hour outside Galway in the Gaeltacht region. This region is one of the Irish-speaking areas of the country. The community center is tasked with helping the area with whatever needs that might arise and helping to keep the Irish language alive. One student was placed here to help in the nursery and other tasks around the center.

Students then traveled to Bunbeg, Ireland, to serve at Organization 6. While the name of the center suggests religious affiliation, there is no such affiliation. The community center is used for various events and meetings as well as meeting the needs of the locals. Students participated in the day camp. They were also asked to give their opinion and expertise on a youth center that

would serve as an after-school hangout for the local youth. Lastly, students left a legacy piece by painting handprints on a wall of the community center.

Data Collection

The leaders of the organizations in which students served were interviewed using an interview guide developed based on Enos and Morton's (2003) campus and community partnerships framework. These interviews occurred in a semi-structured face-to-face format and lasted approximately thirty minutes to an hour. The interviews consisted of information gathering about the organizations themselves as well as the role of the students' participation in the organization. Questions focused on student roles, the supervisors' thoughts and perceptions of the students, their initial reactions to having students complete service, and their reactions to the students' service at the end of their placements. This research was approved as part of a larger research project by the University of Florida's Institutional Research Board.

Data Analysis

Interviews with the supervisor of the organizations were recorded with consent and then transcribed by the main researcher in Microsoft Word. All notes from interviews and observations were typed into a Microsoft Word document for reference. Transcripts were numbered by organization to help with reference during analysis.

For the initial coding process, structural coding was used to initially identify commonalities, differences, and relationships (Saldaña, 2015). Using the key elements that define transactional and transformational partnerships, data was coded specifically looking for where these indicators appeared. These key elements included what the students were doing, length of time, did they have any return from the organization, and the structure in which the students were operating. Once identified, the indicators were labeled either transactional or transformational.

After initial coding was complete, axial coding was used to see the themes and subthemes as well as how they fit together (Saldaña, 2015). The interviews that were originally transcribed and labeled as transactional and transformational were then used to determine specific themes related to the impact the student's service-learning had on the organization. Then, the data were grouped into themes found within the interviews. These themes were cultural exchange, the skill level of the student, and moving the partnership forward.

Trustworthiness and Confirmability

Two types of triangulation were used to establish trustworthiness for this research: data triangulation and methodological triangulation. Data triangulation involves repeated data collection over time, space, and person, while methodological triangulation includes multiple methods for data collection (Denzin, 2006). Member checks were also used to establish

trustworthiness. Peer debriefing was also used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research methodology.

Confirmability and dependability were established as the main researcher used a methodological journal to ensure accuracy in the researcher's ideas, changes, and thoughts as the research progressed (Erlandson et al., 1993). Notes were also taken during the initial organization interviews. Notes consisted of the researcher's thoughts on potential follow-up questions in relation to the theoretical framework as well as any thoughts on how the research was progressing. Any changes in the methodology were also noted in the journal to ensure accuracy in reporting.

Results

Rather than looking at the themes found within the results for transformational partnerships, the research looked at each organization and how they chose to use the students who were completing their service-learning at the organization to determine if the partnerships were transactional versus transformational. Each organization used the students in a different manner, which gave different results regarding a transformational partnership. In the issue of this case study and understanding transactional to transformational partnerships, each organization should be looked at individually rather than holistically. Enos and Morton (2003) established what makes an act transactional versus transformational. The following descriptions are based on the observations made at each organization. The observations were then categorized as either transactional or transformational

Transactional Acts

Organization 1 focused on providing a stable environment to complete educational endeavors for youth within the traveler population of Galway. During the school year, the community center provides afterschool camps that focus on youth completing homework. In the summer, the community center provides an age-based summer camp. The two students who were placed there assisted in the summer camp. While there, the students assisted the camp workers in whatever capacity was needed. Although the camp was ongoing, the students' participation was limited to three days a week. There was also a new age group of youth every week. Here, the students provided a short-term placement for the youth summer camp.

Students at Organization 4 were tasked with providing a youth day camp in a Galway refugee center. It was up to the students to design every aspect of the day-to-day operations of the camp. The students held camp from 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday of each week. The age range of the youth who participated in the camp was ages six to eleven. It is of particular note that there was no camp before the students came to the center, and once the students were done with their placements at the refugee center, the summer camp did not continue. The summer camp was only in session for three and a half weeks.

Organization 5's main goal was to provide numerous services to the Irish-speaking community in which it is placed. The lone student who was placed there took on working in the daycare for the morning part of the day. In the afternoon portion of the day, the student would complete various tasks around the community center or be taken around the community to understand the Irish-speaking community better.

Lastly, Organization 6 was another community center in a rural Irish-speaking part of Ireland that focused on providing whatever the community might need. The center's goal was to see a need and provide a solution for that need. The students took part in helping with a summer day camp that was ongoing. They assisted the camp counselors with whatever help might be needed.

All these acts would be considered transactional due to their nature. They are short-term placements with the specific goal of providing a space for students to conduct service-learning. While the faculty directors intend to continue the program, each iteration would be transactional as the students are on short-term placements.

Transformational Acts

In Organization 6, the main project the students gave their opinion on was a drop-in youth center where the youth in the community (those from the ages of thirteen to eighteen) might have a place to go to after school to hang out in a safe environment. The community center was looking to remodel a building and asked that the students give insight into what might be needed. They also visited another drop-in youth center to understand the workings of one better. Students also had the opportunity to meet with the youth and determine how they would benefit from the drop-in center. While certain aspects of this placement are transactional in nature, the partnership is more closely aligned with a transformational outlook due to the multiple ways the students were involved at the community center.

One overarching concern from all organizations was if the students had passed GARDA vetting. GARDA is the national police in Ireland, similar to the Federal Bureau of Investigation that can be found in the United States. All persons wanting to volunteer with youth must pass a background check through GARDA. This question of students having GARDA vetting came up in every interview. All leaders mentioned that once they knew that the students had passed the GARDA vetting, they were more apt to work with them.

Organizations 2 and 3 were not visited during the initial visit for data collection due to logistical constraints and privacy issues. Organization 2 was visited during the follow-up interviews that took place seven months after the conclusion of the program.

Table 1. Transactional Acts vs. Transformational Acts

Organization	Transactional Act	Transformational Act
1	Assisting camp workers	
4	Providing day camp activities	
5	Working in daycare	
6	Helping with summer camp	Gave guidance on a drop-in youth center

Long-term Impacts on Organizations

We see various impacts on organizations regarding the long-term outcomes of service-learning. While each organization had different responses, three major themes emerged on how the organizations continued to be influenced by the students' service-learning: cultural exchanges, the skill level of students, and moving partnerships forward.

Cultural Exchanges

The organizations focused on how students coming from an American culture influenced the students they worked with. The organizations all reported that this was one of the main areas about which the youth were excited. Whether it was talking to the students about the youths' preconceived notions about American culture or sharing what the students do in everyday life, it helped them realize there was a bigger world.

Specifically, with the organization that worked with autistic youth, the supervisor felt that giving autistic youth a chance to meet someone from another culture expanded the youths' horizon of possibilities. The supervisor of Organization 2 stated, "I thought it was great for the children, and the different, the culture thing, firstly that the, your students were American. That was lovely for our children to have someone different. And then the different things that we're doing with them." At Organization 6, the leader reported that the students "were able to show the children different games and that there was different people, different cultures that, you know, that there was a whole other world and the biggest way when you're young."

Skill Level of Students

The student's skill level and preparedness were mentioned numerous times in the interviews with the organizations. The supervisors were impressed with how much knowledge the students had to share. One supervisor reported that they never had to worry about or felt the need to supervise as the students were well-equipped to take care of the youth. More so, that students from the United States have a different approach, especially dealing with topics such as mental health. She stated, "they talk to the students about mental health and well-being, and they facilitate a really open sharing and discussion with really young kids." The supervisor of Organization 1 went on to state, "I suppose as well, the quality that the children are actually receiving, the quality of support and care is really, really beneficial. We're obviously, we're here, we're present here in the camps, but we don't feel the need to constantly supervise the students, because we know

from that early orientation, we know their abilities, we know their ideas and we can trust that if they need help they'll come to us.”

In the same sense, the supervisor for Organization 5 reported that having the students placed at the organization was a “benefit to us as they're part of the summer program with us. They bring new skills. Also, they're part of the team. We need a large team during the summer because we have lots of activities. The benefits also are that it gives our kids an opportunity to reach other students in different countries. Also, from the course that you work on, there's specific students that have training edge development in certain areas. That can be matched with some of the needs of the students, of the young people. They can specifically help the young person because they have a skill set that matched that individual.”

Moving Partnerships Forward

In the case of multiple organizations, there is a strong desire to move the partnership beyond students only coming for service in the summer. Two organizations desire to have students come for a longer amount of time and to immerse themselves even more than the six weeks allowed. Also mentioned was the idea that there could be more exchange with the university as well as providing educational opportunities for the youth.

Organization 3 felt “that there could be a bigger involvement there. And if there was a bigger involvement there, that would actually help the people that are on the work experience. What would that involve would be—well I still know very little about your university. Now maybe that is my fault; I am not too sure. And in any exchange, it can start with people exchange like Theresa or like the individuals who we will have this year, be a trio or be a two. But what actually cements that relationship is if that can lead to other projects that are to the advantage of your university and to our community.”

The supervisor for Organization 6 stated that “if they [the students] return to, maybe try and work on a project that they feel, that they want to bring back home or that they come here and spend some time here with us. I think it's important to build on our relationship, something that is nice that I found now that it is nice, that I could be part of a class. It would be nice, then if we were doing something here, that we could look for your expertise over in the States. And I suppose my ultimate goal would be to go and see where it all happens over there.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

Service-learning study abroad programs tend to lend themselves to focus on a transactional partnership. Students venture out of the United States to a new country and provide a service to the organization. However, if there is a desire to move from transactional to transformational partnerships, those collaborating with various organizations need to have more intent behind the

placements. Those leading should continuously ask themselves, what is the intent of this program? What is the service being provided? What is the service the program is receiving?

If the intent is purely to complete service-learning, then the understanding that the partnerships may never move from transactional to transformational should be understood. However, if the intent is for a mutually beneficial relationship that will be transformational, then this concept from Enos and Morton (2003) should be the overarching framework for every decision made during the partnership.

The data attached to this project found that most of the service-learning happening was transactional in what the students are doing in their short time at each organization. However, the faculty that are leading this study abroad program is building to the program being transformational in that they are creating a partnership between the program and the organizations.

More so, the literature on transformational partnerships, while brief, does expand on the need for them to be sustainable and purposeful. Enos and Morton (2003) explain the need for partnerships to go beyond single transactions to more robust partnerships that benefit both communities. Thus, giving way to transformational partnerships rather than only resting in a transactional mode.

Future recommendations for research and best practices with community engagement are as follows: (a) research into the lasting impact of the students and organizations, focusing on one organization as a case study, and (b) for faculty directors to expand on the existing partnership and incorporate elements beyond the summer service-learning placements. Further research should include a continued look at transformational partnerships as a case study, focusing on the development of one specific organization for a longitudinal study. If this partnership can be tracked, it could yield more guidance on establishing and continuing transformational partnerships.

Another focus for future practice rests on the faculty directors of such programs. Their focus should be on creating transformational, rather than transactional, partnerships. Furthermore, faculty directors should emphasize the expansion of existing partnerships to focus on moving them toward transformational partnerships.

Lastly, in terms of program development, the concepts laid out for transformational partnerships are used to establish the parameters of the partnerships. Ideally, universities developing service-learning programs would adopt set parameters of such a program and create clear guidelines. These would be established so that a program is created in a manner that is sustainable and transformational. From that point, faculty should look to these for guidance and sustainability in program development.

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