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Reflection on the Implication of the Jesuit Apostolic Preferences on Study Abroad and International Immersions

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Abstract

The benefit of study abroad and international immersion programs on students has been well documented, but the impact on destination communities that students visit has received significantly less attention. Many of the potential negative economic, social and cultural impacts of foreign visitors highlighted in the literature on tourism are likely to apply to students engaged in study abroad or immersive global programs. The excessive focus on the benefits for students raises the question if study abroad and international global immersions are simply self-serving activities for many. The Jesuit Apostolic Preferences can serve as a discernment tool in the planning and assessment of global experiences that ultimately can serve to join our institutions in mission across the world.

Introduction

Student benefits of study abroad and global immersions of various types have been well documented in the higher education literature. A simple search in relevant literature databases reveals hundreds of articles related to terms such as “study abroad,” “international immersion,” “research,” and “outcomes” published since the year 2000. A significant majority of these studies have clear limitations from a research standpoint (i.e., focus on only one institution, have small sample sizes, do not include comparison groups, or focus only on participants of one specific program in one particular year), but in aggregate suggest a clearer tendency toward positive effect. For example, the research points to strong evidence that students who study abroad or participate in international immersions develop sensitivity to cultural differences, awareness of sociohistorical cultural contexts, adaptability and flexibility to view cultural differences and contextual circumstances through an informed ethno-relative lens, and the empathy to seek deeper understanding while withholding judgment.¹ Published research also provides evidence that study abroad and international immersions positively affect second language acquisition, increase a participant’s likelihood of graduating in four years and perseverance toward graduation of minority students, and influences long-term behavior related to civic engagement and social entrepreneurship well into mid-career.²

The impact of study abroad and international immersion programs on the destination communities students visit has received significantly less attention. Although such considerations should be central to service-learning programs, available research on outcomes is nearly universally focused on students’ cultural and disciplinary competence.³ Interestingly, when community outcomes of programs are reported, they tend to be single case studies or anecdotal descriptions of benefit rather than observable measures of lasting change.⁴

Concerns over the impact of study abroad or international immersion programs on the destination communities likewise are not explicitly articulated as standards for best practice or recommendations for mitigating the effects of study abroad on local communities. For example, the most recent edition of the Forum on Education Abroad’s *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad* suggests only that the organization sending students “respect the cultures and values of the countries in which it operates.”⁵ Likewise, other sources focus on ethical standards for participants and researchers in international service-learning, but do not include a requirement of assurance of a measurable benefit to the community.⁶

Many of the potential negative economic, social, and cultural impacts of foreign visitors highlighted in the literature on tourism are likely to apply to

students engaged in study abroad or immersive global programs.⁷ For example, in May 2019 the Cuban government announced rationing of certain food items such as chicken eggs, rice, and beans due to an economic crisis worsened by U.S. sanctions, but hotels that cater to tourists were expected to be unaffected due to Cuban government policies.⁸ While tourism contributed to the economy, it was also expected to reduce availability of staple foods for the local population and promote economic inequality in the community. It is not difficult to imagine that if our students who participate in study abroad program are well-fed, that their well-being comes at hunger cost for the local population.

Authors have reported on the “demonstration effect” of tourists bringing high-end travel gear, clothes, and spending money easily on restaurants and gifts, which may create resentment in locals, foster the perception of Americans as wealthy consumers, or the desire in local people (especially youth) to leave the community so they can make money to buy similar goods.⁹ While tourism is often touted as a way out of poverty for developing countries and as a way of creating health and well-being, often the opposite is the case.¹⁰ Criticism of international volunteerism is growing because it appears to thrive on the notion that global poverty and its consequences can be remedied by well-meaning people who often lack needed skills and experience.¹¹ Despite the much publicized criminal activities around orphanage tourism, the commercialization of volunteering seems undeterred.¹² Strong ethical concerns have long been raised about medical volunteerism as well, because although these participants may have professional knowledge, they are often culturally insensitive, disrupt existing systems with their mere presence, and frequently waste resources by applying learned procedures inappropriately.¹³

The excessive focus on the benefits for students raises the question if study abroad and international global immersions for many are simply self-serving activities. Our main interest as academic institutions clearly does lie in educational aspects, in sourcing and organizing learning placements, and in the safety of students and faculty. But our ethical responsibility goes further and includes protecting local communities from harm. As the senior international officer of a

Jesuit institution that shares in that Society of Jesus’s mission and Universal Apostolic Preferences, I have an obligation to consider much more in my planning of global opportunities for our students than solely their or my institution’s benefit. These Preferences “give a horizon, a point of reference to the whole Society of Jesus. They capture our imaginations and awaken our desires. They unite us in our mission.”¹⁴ There is a set of questions I have been asking myself more lately as I consider whether our study abroad and international immersion efforts truly build the Jesuit mission and Jesuit distinction of educating students *for* the world in the context of the Apostolic Preferences:

Showing the Way to God Through the Spiritual Exercises and Discernment

- Do our international experiences have the fundamental purpose of putting our participants in touch with their true selves, or are they only one more way in which students are bombarded with images and options that drown out their sense of true vocation?
- Do we engage students in a process of discernment that goes beyond their disciplinary studies, or do we stop after reinforcing some notion that an international experience gives them stature, builds their career résumé, and makes them more competitive?
- Does the discernment about participation in study abroad include seeking a deep sense of calling to that location and anticipation that something greater than a cross-cultural experience is in store? How do we help participants integrate the international experience into their spiritual journey?
- Do the opportunities we plan for our students intentionally “open up spaces for the complex dimensions of human freedom, especially religious freedom?”¹⁵ Do we intentionally structure international opportunities to allow—and explicitly invite—participants to ask profound questions and experience belonging to an ecclesial community so they may better know what it means to freely adopt a Christian lifestyle in social, economic, cultural, and political spheres?

- Do our international education and immersion leaders make regular use of spiritual conversation and discernment in the implementation of global experiences? Are they prepared to reinforce dialogue, reconciliation, and bonds of community with all cultures and thus nurture a testimony to hope regardless of academic subject matter?

Walking with the Excluded: Walk with the Poor, the Outcasts of the World, Those Whose Dignity Has Been Violated, in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice

- Are considerations of the Jesuit mission of reconciliation and justice as modeled by Jesus part of the very planning of all international opportunities from the outset? Do such considerations shape these experiences or are they only afterthoughts used to justify them, but not transform them? Are all international opportunities designed to help us better understand human peripheries, to adopt a style of life and work appropriate to those situations, and to engender credible accompaniment?
- Do our international programs promote economic inequality? Do foreigners or economic elites own the hotels our students occupy? Do poorer local people receive any economic benefit from “home stays,” or are those reserved for middle-class homes? Do local prices go up due to our student visits? Do our visits contribute to economic dependence on outsiders, becoming oriented on pleasing wealthy foreigners rather than on local needs?
- Are local people excluded from any of the areas where students are encouraged or allowed to go? Do any of our “safety precautions” isolate our students unnecessarily and unintentionally confirm our privilege?
- Do our programs impose any hardship on local people, such as food or water shortages? Do students’ patterns of consumption contribute to problems in the community (i.e., how do we consider garbage disposal, added use of costly electrical supply for students to charge their devices, and so on)?

- Do we seek to mitigate locally the carbon pollution we generate through our travel?

Journeying with Youth: Accompany Young People in the Creation of a Hope Filled Future


- Do our international opportunities have a purpose to help our students find meaning in their lives, draw closer to God and engender hope? Do we limit these opportunities to academic dimensions and set more fundamental questions about human existence aside?
- Do we prepare students to understand the lives of their counterparts in the destination community? Does our planning intentionally seek opportunities for our students to gain insight into the lives of local young people, the challenges they face? Do we specifically seek to understand the hopes of the younger members of the local community who carry in them the future of their society?
- Do our students demonstrate forms of privilege during their visit, such as eating “our” food, playing “our” music, dressing in a way that is inappropriate for the local culture? Do they smoke, drink or consume drugs, thus being poor role models for local youth? Does anything about our students’ presence reinforce a negative self-image for local people and risk alienating local youth from their families and communities?

Caring for Our Common Home: Collaborate, with Gospel Depth, for the Protection and Renewal of God’s Creation

- Have our institutions developed sustainability initiatives that take into account the carbon footprint created by our international travel? Do our institutions’ sustainability initiatives include consciousness-raising and discernment regarding our carbon footprint, potential environmental harm, and, consequently, impact on the most vulnerable of the world?
- As part of programming of Jesuit institutions, do our international experiences fundamentally seek to find a spiritually based answer to the question: “What is our relation to nature?”

- *Laudato Si'* reminds us that “the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption, are essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment. These attitudes also attune us to the moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us.”¹⁶ Are students invited into a conversation about shared stewardship of natural resources or do we instead reinforce a consumer perspective that places their benefit above that of others? Are considerations of our shared responsibility to pass on the resources God gives us and to recognize the intrinsic value of Creation as part of the design of international experiences?
- Do we include environmental or compensatory mitigation in the planning of

international programs to offset impacts of our travel?

Study abroad and international immersion programs raise a number of ethical concerns, and none of our programs should be beyond scrutiny against moral and ethical requirements to demonstrate in practice and outcomes that our presence helps local communities or, at minimum, does not cause harm. The Apostolic Preferences have implications that call for careful discernment about every aspect of global programming. They require that we justify and validate outcomes of our global programs. Otherwise, not only may time, energy and money be wasted, but the putting of personal agendas above the destination community's disappointment or even exploitation can continue unchallenged. The Preferences can give a horizon to our global planning and capture our imagination. Ultimately, they can help us unite in a hopeful mission across the world. 

Notes

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