ГОДИШНИК НА СОФИЙСКИЯ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ „СВ. КЛИМЕНТ ОХРИДСКИ“
ФАКУЛТЕТ ПО НАУКИ ЗА ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО И ИЗКУСТВАТА
КНИГА ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИ НАУКИ
Том 119

ANNUAL OF SOFIA UNIVERSITY “ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI”
FACULTY OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES AND THE ARTS
BOOK OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES
Volume 119

THE VALUE AND CHALLENGES OF SHORT-TERM SERVICE-LEARNING TRIPS

MELINDA R. PIERSON

California State University, Fullerton, USA

BROOKE E. PIERSON

Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, USA

BRETT M. PIERSON

Arizona State University, Tempe, USA

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60059/GSU.FNOI.PN.119.7-24

Abstract. Although short-term service-learning trips have received bad press for the possibility of damaging economies around the world, hurting relationships and partnerships, and promoting personal glorification, the truth is the opposite of the findings of this current study. Numerous studies have shown that short-term service-learning trips are actually impactful for the people who participate in them and have made a difference in the lives of those whom are served in visiting countries. They have also been proven to increase the resources and support for marginalized people from around the world. To determine the benefits and impact of short-term service-learning trips, this study surveyed 58 people of varying ages with a variety of jobs in multiple fields including education, the medical field, and social work as well as schooling experiences who traveled on short-term service-learning trips. The benefits of short-term service-learning trips for young American high school and college students include the creation and growth of global citizens who care about the world around them, the development of partnerships where resources are shared, and a deeper understanding of how to listen and respect other cultures while building

personal self-confidence. The economic, sociological, and psychological perspectives of short-term service-learning trips will also be discussed and analyzed.
Keywords: service-learning, adolescents, young adults, global citizens, partnerships

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of American teens and young adults have traveled around the world to serve in diverse, poverty-stricken countries to build houses, work in orphanages, and set up academic, sports, and religious camps for the local children. This is a common practice for American adolescents and young adults as the goal of learning more about the world and its diversity takes shape in American culture. Stout and Wescher (2017) share an amazing statistic that "29% of all 13-to-17 year olds in the United States" have participated in short-term service-learning experiences related to their religion (p. 23). In addition, more than 85% of higher education institutions in the United States offer service-learning trips for their college-aged students to increase their global knowledge and experiences and to give them opportunities to gain work or volunteer-related experiences to grow their future career interests (Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2010).

Many adolescents and young adults participate in these short-term service-learning trips to serve around the world in multiple countries and to find greater purpose in life while increasing their future job prospects in the United States. Students in secondary schools or universities in a variety of majors frequently participate in these trips, but it seems most common that human services majors such as education, medical, and social work participate more often due to their desire to help others in diverse communities and around the world. They are heading into careers that show care, concern, and empathy for others and serving in a foreign country to support others may build their resumes for future job opportunities which would give them an advantage over other American students.

They may ask themselves the following questions:

How can I better contribute to my community and the international community?

Can I gain work experience by volunteering for several weeks to serve a specific community internationally?

What is my purpose in life and how might a global trip increase my ability to determine that?

What communication skills might I improve on if I travel to another part of the world to volunteer my time?

What social skills will I learn if I work in another culture with a different group of people who may teach me their ways of conducting life?

How will collaborating with others in a different country teach me better teamwork skills that will be more employable in my life?

How will employers view my volunteer work and will it benefit me in my future job pursuits?

While there is much controversy over the value of these trips, the advantages far outweigh the supposed harm to these regions which have been written about in the literature (Carlson, 2019; Olsen & McNeel, 2019). The benefits of short-term service-learning trips for young American high school and college students include the development of how to learn from and respect other cultures, and the creation of growth of global citizens who care about the world communities around them. Studies show that confidence is built as well and that it may increase the possibility of their desire to work in a foreign country in some capacity in the future (Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2010). They begin to reflect on and realize the impact that has been made to both the host country and the participating travelers. The research strongly supports these findings across numerous studies (Johnson, 2014; Nagel, 2021; Anderson, Kim, & Larios, 2017; Hildreth, 2023).

SHORT-TERM SERVICE-LEARNING TRIP MODELS

There are a variety of different ways that people volunteer on service-learning trips. Different majors from students in the United States are recorded as participating by the Open Doors 2025 Report. These majors include business and management, social sciences, physical and life sciences, fine and applied arts, health professions, and engineering. White students dominate service-learning trips with 65.2% of the total number while Hispanic students constitute 12.2% of those who choose to participate in their institution's service-learning trips. Most students are in undergraduate programs as very few graduate students can travel and work in short-term service-learning experiences due to life obligations such as family and current employment.

Students may increase their cultural competence on these trips by participating in homestays – opportunities to live with a host family. Adolescents and young adults partake in their traditions including traditional meal traditions while learning to appreciate the differences between the American culture and the host country's culture. Students often report how interesting it is to become entrenched in another culture and what practices they may take back to their home country. This can benefit students even if they are participating in a short-term service-learning trip.

The majority of students receive academic credit for these trips as they are enrolled in a specific experiential course which is an important motivator for leaving their "comfort zone" at home and traveling to a different culture. However, The Open Doors Report 2025 concluded that 33,078 American students did not receive academic credit, but participated in volunteer, work, or internship experiences that they felt would support their future careers. Thus, these students viewed their

participation as a "resume builder" to increase their chances of being hired in a tight job market in the United States.

A significant number of students also reported that they participated in a virtual learning experience to gain global understanding through remote internships, collaborative project-based learning, and video conferences where they could converse with people in different countries to gain additional knowledge about their international communities. One article researched teacher candidates' involvement in supporting youth in Ukraine at the start of the war and how university students virtually gained experience through a literacy tutoring project (Pierson, Pierson, & Tysrlina-Spady, 2023). Another article detailed how different countries handled the pandemic with virtual support from university students in a teaching credential program in the United States (Pierson & Pierson, 2021).

General suggestions for planning a service-learning trip offered by Sachau, Brasher, and Fee (2010) include organized planning, determining transportation and housing for the group, identifying the project or work opportunities for the students, and focusing on the liabilities and barriers to a successful trip. They espouse the importance of detailed reflections on topics like travel warnings, United States Center for Disease Control advice and suggestions, and country differences such as outlets for charging electronics, exchanging money, food differences and insurance necessities.

An Economic Perspective

Participation in a short-term **service**-learning trip can benefit the host country as well as help build knowledge of other economies around the world which can increase awareness of poverty both at home and abroad. This would benefit students at the university level who are majoring in international affairs, business, or even political science.

Service-learning trips can be extremely expensive and Simmelink (2015) estimates that trips consisting of less than two weeks of service cost up to $2.4 billion annually for participants. Olsen and McNeel (2019) confirm that "American Christians alone spend billions of dollars per year" (p. 35). Broken down even further, Hensley (2016) reports that a significant amount of money is spent which is approximately "$25,000-$50,000 per group for a one-week" service learning trip (p. 3) This seems unreasonable considering the fact that this money could be given to the countries in need and they would be able to spend it wisely on what their citizens need most such as food, clean water projects, education and medical supplies. Yet, Anderson, Kim, and Larios (2017) point out that "it is unlikely that a cash contribution to the local community would have ever been made" (p. 33) unless someone visited the location that is in need in person. Thus, the nature of visiting a country in poverty inspires people to act more generously and they may be more likely to economically support that region because they have seen it first-hand. They then have a connection to that specific part of the world. There is a possibility that this philanthropy will continue long into the future; thus, continuing

to benefit the country and people that were visited. The inspiration to act in a difficult situation is increased due to authentic opportunities to learn about the differences among people around the world.

Another economic benefit of short-term service-learning trips is that participants have the opportunity to learn how other countries trade, engage in commerce, and also struggle to keep their economy afloat. Nagel (2021) comments that "... young Americans are woefully unprepared to deal with the many challenges of globalisation, including labour-market competition…" (p. 1296) and that "trips. . .have a 'shock value' that opens the eyes of privileged young people to the world's richness, as well as its many ills" (p. 1296). Young Americans who have the money to travel on service-learning trips can learn about economics around the world and build a greater sensitivity to those living in poverty with a new understanding of the reasons why this occurred. Serving in a developing country can bring economic knowledge and greater comprehension of how different economic knowledge and greater comprehension of how different economies work around the world which may then contribute to their desire to help those in need in their own communities. Stout and Wescher (2017) discuss how service-learning trip participants may begin to recognize "poverty within their home communities as well" (p. 37) which was the opposite of "very few expressed a similar passion for addressing poverty and racism in South Carolina..." (Nagel, 2019: 59). Building a wider perspective of the world by participating in a service -learning trip can ultimately bring about "dramatic shifts in how I view poverty" (Simmelink, 2015:26). This can influence perspectives and future decisions about how money is spent. Adolescents and young adults increase their knowledge of business and how money supports economies which may end up having a positive impact on their home countries as the volunteers may be likely to increase their financial knowledge.

If experts such as architects, construction company owners, and skilled laborers can offer their services to developing countries and lead teams to these areas, it would benefit their economies by building stronger infrastructures. Young adults can contribute to the local economy by supporting building projects and by providing resources such as paint that the region may not have access to instead of them appearing "like a threat to longer-term work" (Olsen & McNeel, 2019: 34). It is important that short-term service-learning trip participants do not "stunt the maturity of local churches by doing their work or creating expectations they are unable or unwilling to meet on their own" (Hildreth, 2023: 4). Local workers should be empowered to assist with building projects to learn new skills that can be consistently utilized in the future. These local workers may also share their knowledge and skills with the adolescent and young adult volunteers so there is a reciprocity in support from each country represented which benefits both sides.

The American economy could also benefit from service-learning trips abroad. One way this could occur is that young adults would have the opportunity to learn

new skills by participating in construction projects with these experts; thus, bringing back that knowledge to their home countries. Although this economic benefit seems small, it is obvious that America would benefit from having more skilled young citizens. Participants must be careful of only "bringing in resources...rather than... stronger resources the community possesses internally" (Stout & Wescher, 2017: 25). Yet, American airline and transportation companies gain money by being used for service-learning trips since so many people are participating each year. The economic benefits stretch from the participants' home countries to the host countries. "A personal favorite is always a trip to the local market..." (Hensley, 2016: 8). Getting to shop to support the local economy for regional crafts and delicacies is an entertaining perk of service- learning trips.

A Sociological Perspective

Participants of short-term service-learning trips gain greater awareness of people around the world and increase positive mental health both within the host country as well as from the participants' base country. "Mission trip participants may become concerned with difficult social issues" (Johnson, 2014: 15) which had not been presented in their own culture. This new social awareness leads to a greater desire to make an impact in the world which builds purpose and increased self-confidence as one contributes to positive changes in a community. However, participants must be careful of feeling better than others as "the socio-historical identity of the local community is valued much less. . .than the activities of the trip itself" (Huang, 2019: 58). Trip leaders should focus on having consistent discussions about the strengths of each culture and how a partnership would benefit both. Olsen and McNeel (2019) point out "... if their aim is to become more informed," service-learning trip participants gain comprehension of an area and its heritage (p. 37). This is important for personal growth and overall knowledge about the world and cultures around them.

Understanding racial differences and being more empathetic to these issues also contributes to a greater bond with all people. By traveling on a short-term service-learning trip, "white members were forced to confront racial issues that they would, and could, usually ignore." (Huang, 2019: 61). However, learning the differences in the cultures and trying to have deep comprehension of local issues can be extremely difficult for young adult participants who have always been focused on their own lives. "Rather than building bridges, we build walls" (Hildreth, 2023: 2). Oftentimes, "rather than on deep context" (Huang, 2019: 58), the participants' thoughts and needs would be a primary focal point. Their "lack of cultural understanding, experience and preparation, attitudes of superiority" (Mantey, Doh, Lasker, Alang, Donkor, & Aldrink, 2021: 2) must be strongly avoided along with pushing one's own ideas. Service-learning trip leaders must focus on supporting their participants in learning "the value of local cultures...be challenged to further reflect on their own racial and ethnic identity (Huang, 2019: 62). This is a benefit of

learning about a new culture which should be encouraged around the world for all adolescents and young adults. Extensive research shows that travel improves these outcomes in people.

The opportunity to improve a region in some way can be a major goal of service-learning trips because it gives the participants a renewed feeling of having a purpose in the world. This impact helps participants be more aware of the world around them and to have greater empathy when world events occur. "Humanitarian groups who provide food, rebuilding after disasters...and sanitary water wells for clean water all generate sustainable work that can and does improve the quality of life" (Hensley, 2016: 4). Young adults who participate in a service-learning trip must avoid the "paternalistic perspective" (Huang, 2019: 59) of feeling better than others and instead focus on becoming "informed advocates" to "spark a passion for justice. . .while helping them develop wisdom in their own activism" and "improve their ministry to immigrants back in their own communities" (Olsen & McNeel, 2019: 37). Overall, participants should have the opportunity to reflect on the impact made and the newly found purpose in possible new life goals that were influenced because of the service they provided to the community they visited. Participants learned with "space and time away from home to consider what they want to achieve" (Hopkins, Olson, Smith, & Laurie, 2015: 393). This helps service-learning trip participants determine their purpose for future service in life.

Besides this positive feeling due to the impact made on the community and the wonderful opportunity to play with children in orphanages, some researchers pointed out the possibility of negatively influencing a group of people visited by "disrupting children's lives and…confusing children who already struggled with attachment issues" (Olsen & McNeel, 2019: 34). Despite teams setting up children's camps with games, art, crafts, and singing, "the short-term team may be harming the children's development" (Carlson, 2019: 9). However, the likelihood of the children wanting to be held and loved is much greater than them not wanting the attention as described by Hensley (2016) "it was very evident that the children we served were very eager to be hugged and cared about" (p. 4). "Many have the best intentions..." (Anderson, Kim, & Larios, 2017: 28) and groups need to determine best practices in not harming children indirectly by visiting and developing short-term relationships. Simmelink (2015) recommends partnering "with someone who has made at least a two-year commitment to be in the thick of the situation" (p. 26) which will provide the opportunity for the short-term service-learning team to hear the needs of the community from someone who has been there longer and has had a deeper connection to the people. Therefore, a fruitful contribution can be made without harming any citizens of the host country.

A Psychological Perspective

Relationships are built between the host country and the participants' country which increases self-confidence, emotional maturity, and a sense of gratitude for all

who are involved. Because host community members are mostly appreciative of the help, resources, and service brought by the service-learning team, the group members would be able to "identify common interests and a common humanity" (Johnson, 2014: 9) to begin to develop friendships. "Of critical note is the happiness of patients about volunteers" (Mantey, Doh, Lasker, Alang, Donkor, & Aldrink, 2021: 9) which shows that the host country is eager to build relationships with outside partners. Even though there can be "a troubling conceit at the heart of missions" (Nagel, 2021: 1299) and connections between the service learning team and host citizens "could serve to reinforce or increase prejudice among trip participants" (Johnson, 2014: 10), the development of positive relationships are possible as people take the time to get to know one another and find similarities. Keeping these connections alive is more likely in current times due to the influence of social media. Teens and young adults are quick to add new friends and acquaintances to WhatsApp, Instagram, and Snapchat accounts which will help their new relationships thrive. Even when the service-learning trip participants met people from different faiths, it was possible that they learned to respect their differences and still were able to build strong friendships with the local community (Nagel, 2021: 1298).

Young adults who participate in service-learning trips have reported increased "religious resilience and self-confidence in personal relationships with God" (Hopkins, Olson, Smith, & Laurie, 2015: 391) as well as "feelings of religious maturity" (Hopkins, Olson, Smith, & Laurie, 2015: 392). By being a part of a service-learning team, young adults get closer to one another as they experience hardships in a foreign country and also take the time to reflect during evening events with bonding activities. They are able to better share their "process of self-discovery and personal transformation and become more aware and open to difference" (Nagel, 2021: 1288). They are no longer in their safe environments at home, but are often "in exotic locales that broaden one's horizons" (Anderson, Kim, & Larios, 2017: 29) and build their faith in their higher calling to do good works in a community. The participants gain a "passion for evangelism and missions or to strengthen spiritual disciplines" (Olsen & McNeel, 2019: 37). The personal development to live as an excellent citizen due to a short-term service-learning trip is profound and well worth the effort and money to be a part of one.

A Pedagogical Perspective

Identifying opportunities to travel with students and expose them to different cultures, regions, and experiences is important for many colleges and universities in the United States. It is common to have a department at a university that focuses on study abroad trips for students that are led by faculty. Different models exist and a few examples will be presented next.

SUMMER/WINTER SERVICE-LEARNING TRIP

Students may also choose to volunteer or work internationally for a specific time period such as during summer or a winter break because the service-learning project is not tied directly to a specific course of study. This would give them the freedom to get the experience they desire rather than being forced to work in a specific capacity related to university content. They may have time off from school so would use that time to gain experience by serving or working in another country. The Open Doors Report 2025 stated that 117,373 students from the United States served during the summer during the 2023/24 schoolyear although there was no data listed detailing winter term participation.

One Example: Eichstatt, Germany Service-Learning Trip

Every winter for eight years from 2013-2020, university students from Southern California who planned to go into the field of education traveled to an area outside of Munich called Eichstatt to work in schools to gain experience with education systems in Europe. Approximately 20 students would travel each December and January during their winter break. This gave them the opportunity to experience weather completely different from the weather that they experienced at home which gave them creative ideas on how to engage students in all types of environments.

Students tutored students in the city's schools which supported students in a variety of grades. They would meet with teachers and learn about their education background, practices that they felt were working well in Europe, and also share how they best support all types of learners. Students were able to authentically ask questions and learn from experts in Germany who were veteran teachers.

Students from California also gained experience working with German university students who also wanted to be teachers. They would support joint conversations about specified topics and put on a small conference of presentations. Students from California and from Germany reported that they learned excellent strategies from each other that they were able to take back to their respective school sites.

TWO WEEK SERVICE-LEARNING TRIP

A two-week trip is another choice for people who may have limited time available to travel to another country. This could be because of finances or other commitments such as family responsibilities or employment obligations. Students may choose to participate as a part of a class that is focused on something specific such as supporting a medical eye clinic as students work to learn opthamology through a course and this service experience. Another example might be a student in an international affairs course who travels to another country to learn about a specific culture or group of people. The people surveyed for this study were in this category – they participated on a two-week service-learning trip.

One Example: Port Au Prince, Haiti Service-Learning Trip

Students from a university in California traveled to Haiti six times between 2016 and 2020 to work in an orphanage school. The group consisted of no more than ten students due to safety issues and they had the opportunity to work with students of different levels and ages. This included some students with disabilities, but they mostly supported preschool students through age 15.

In addition, students would help support a local teachers' conference for 100 teachers from the Port au Prince area of Haiti. Topics included literacy strategies, interventions for difficult behaviors, and ideas on how to increase the desire to be positive citizens in their community. The university students would help lead small group discussions with the teachers. They reported that they learned new ideas and techniques on how to increase student engagement from their work with these teachers and administrators from a developing country.

SEMESTER OR YEARLONG STUDY TRIP

This type of trip is commonly called a study abroad trip in the United States. In the 2023/24 school year (the most current data published by Opendoorsdata.org), 298,180 students in the United States studied abroad in numerous countries with Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom being the most popular countries that host students from the United States. Countries listed that were also popular, but that highlighted interest in working in developing countries included Costa Rica, Belize, Mexico, and Ecuador. Students studying for at least one full semester increased from 4% to 6% during this time period studied of 2023/24. Europe was the largest host of students from the United States with the majority studying for the summer term (191,209 students). Latin America and the Caribbean hosted 31,453 while Asia hosted 30, 361. Even Antarctica hosted 47 American students on a study abroad trip. Africa welcomed 13,952 students during this same schoolyear in 2023/24 with Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda being amongst the countries most visited on this continent (Open Doors, 2025).

METHOD

Surveys were sent to participants who traveled on a short-term service-learning trip within the past year. All participants gave their consent to share their perspectives on their experiences with this type of travel. Survey questions included the following:

1. What motivates you to participate in service-learning trips? (Select all that apply).
    a. Desire to serve a higher power
    b. Desire to help others
    c. Opportunity to learn new skills
    d. Interest in cultural exchange
    e. Academic credit
    f. Personal growth and development
    g. Desire to meet my sponsored child
    h. Other
2. What factors influenced your decision to go on a service-learning trip? (Select all that apply).
    a. Cost of the trip
    b. Church or organization recommendation
    c. Location of the trip
    d. Duration of the trip
    e. Type of service activities
    f. Recommendations from friends or peers
    g. Organization facilitating the trip
    h. Other
3. What do you hope to gain from participating in a service-learning trip? (Select all that apply).
    a. Growth in a relationship with a higher power
    b. Personal fulfillment
    c. Improved understanding of social issues
    d. Networking opportunities
    e. Enhancing my resume
    f. Lifelong friendships
    g. Get more connected to the church or organization
    h. Other
4. Have you previously participated in a service-learning trip? (Select one).
    a. Yes
    b. No
5. If you answered yes to the previous question, list the locations and how many times you visited those places. What was the most memorable aspect of that experience?

6. What barriers prevent you from participating in service-learning trips? (Select all that apply).
    a. Financial constraints
    b. Time commitment
    c. Concerns about safety
    d. Other personal commitments
    e. Social concerns (not knowing your team members)
    f. Concerns about health while traveling
    g. Distance to location
7. What types of service projects are you most interested in? (Select all that apply).
    a. Anything that the church or organization recommends that meets the needs of people around the world
    b. Humanitarian - food and water projects
    c. Building projects
    d. Education and tutoring including religious camps
    e. Community development
    f. Healthcare services
    g. Family supports (counseling, social services)
    h. Evangelism
    i. Other
8. How do you believe service-learning trips benefit the communities where they take place?
9. What does a perfect mission trip look like for you?
10. Demographics
    a. Gender
    b. Age
    c. Current employment
    d. Did any family members travel with you?
    e. How many people did you know on your trip when you first applied?

RESULTS

Demographics

A total of 15 males and 43 females participated in the study. The following lists the age ranges of the survey participants: 34.5% were 16-22 years old, 20.7% were 41-50 years old, 17.2% were 51-60 years old, 13.8% were 71-80 years old, and the age groups of 23-30 years old and 31-40% were under 10%. Examples of current jobs of the survey participants included students, businessmen and women, teachers, principals, aides, restaurant hostesses, babysitters, and dentists. 57.1% of the participants reported that family members traveled with them on their service-learning trips. Regarding knowing other team members when they applied to

participate in the trip, 18.5% of the survey participants responded that they did not know anyone else who was participating on their trip.

Quantitative Responses

Responses regarding the motivation to participate in service learning trips (question #1) included the following data: 100% wanted to help others, 96.6% wanted to serve a higher power, 75.9% attended for personal growth and development, 72.4% were interested in a cultural exchange, 37.9% wanted the opportunity to learn new skills, and 31% were excited to meet their sponsored children.

The question regarding the factors that influence participation in a service-learning trip (question #2) included these informative responses: 82.8% stated that the type of service activities mattered, 62.1% said that the location of the trip was important, 51.7% said the duration of the trip was a factor, 44.8% mentioned the cost of the trip, 41.4% shared that the organization planning the trip matters, 37.9% stated that recommendations from friends made a difference in their decision to attend, and 27.6% participated because of the recommendation of the organization or church.

Question #3 focused on what a participant hopes to learn from going on a service-learning trip. The responses were as follows: 96.6% of participants desired a better personal relationship with a higher power, 69% stated that they wanted to gain a better understanding of social issues, and three different responses gained 65.5% of the participants' approval - personal fulfillment, lifelong friendships, and more connections with the organization or church. 24.1% of the participants stated that they believed they would gain networking opportunities while 20.7% of the respondents believed their resumes would be boosted by these experiences.

The next question (#4) asked the participants if they had previously gone on a service- learning trip. 89.7% of the respondents stated that they had gone on more than one service- learning trip. The locations of these trips varied from places all over the world with Mexico being the most common for Americans.

The barriers that prevented people from traveling on a service-learning trip was the focus of the next question. Financial constraints were a barrier for 76% of the people and the time commitment (64%) also proved to be an important factor in preventing travel. 36% of the respondents mentioned other personal commitments which included factors related to family and employment. Concerns about health also proved to be a barrier for 24% of the participants and concerns about safety worried 20% of the people who participated in this study.

Community development was rated as being the most important service project (69%) with participation in anything the organization or church recommends coming in at a close second choice (65.5%). 55.2% of the respondents rated teaching and tutoring the community as a vital part of the trip. Humanitarian projects (food distribution and clean water projects) were rated as important by 44.8% of

participants. Healthcare services as well as family support projects were both rated as important by 37.9%. 31% of the respondents shared that they hoped to share information about a higher power with the people in the community. 20.7% of the people felt that building projects were one of the most important service projects.

Qualitative Responses

Participants were asked how service-learning trips benefit the community. Responses were all positive with some comments as follows:

"Shows that people around the world care about them and want to help them."

"It impacts families in every way - spiritually, physically, and financially."

"It shows people that they are not alone."

"Education and love give the community hope."

The next question focused on what a perfect service-learning trip looks like and participants responded with the following:

"Minimum downtime. Maximum participation."

"A trip where team members build relationships with their hosts."

"A trip that meets both tangible and spiritual needs."

"Learning more about the culture, making connections with people in the community, helping to educate people in the community, collaborating with our hosts, supporting basic needs in various ways, and sharing resources that are sustainable long after we leave."

DISCUSSION

It is evident that all of the participants of service-learning trips felt that the trips were beneficial and made a strong impact on their own lives as well as the community around them. Survey respondents were incredibly positive about the advantages of traveling to serve a different population in the world even though there were some concerns prior to travel. Although financial concerns and the time commitment of traveling can be issues for the participants, 89.7% of the participants reported that they were traveling for at least a second time which means that they were able to find solutions to solve these barriers.

Growth of Global Citizens

This study shows the significant growth of global citizens who care about others around the world which matters heavily in this world of technology and social media focus for adolescents and young adults. With the increasing concerns surrounding mental health and well-being for our youth populations, a purpose and focus on others should play an important role in shaping the community as the focus changes. With the ratings of 100% as a desire to help others, this needs to be expanded to include more and more youth so that they find new desires and

purposes within a community. 75.9% of the trip participants stated that personal growth and development was extremely important to them which builds their character, provides them opportunities to learn and improve their outlook on life, and mature at this pivotal time in life.

Development and Growth of Partnerships and Support Options

Survey participants (82.8%) reported that the types of activities influenced them to go as they found the activities new and exciting, an opportunity to learn a new skill, and/or a chance to make a difference in the community. Building lifelong friendships while serving mattered to 65.5% of the respondents as they sought growth socially and wanted deeper connections to people around them. Simply put, being connected to others matters to people and makes it worth traveling around the world to serve others. Yet, personal fulfillment was also rated highly by 65.5% of the participants which again addresses that need to have a purpose in life. People want to feel like they are impacting the world and by developing key partnerships to help others, it supports the notion that good actions matter in life.

Deeper Understanding of Culture

72.4% of the participants stated that they had an interest in cultural exchange. People want to learn about others and are curious about their customs, traditions, holiday celebrations, and how food and clothing play a role in their society. By having this cultural exchange, 69% of the respondents stated that they had an improved understanding of social issues. Thus, they changed their view of others for the positive by traveling to other parts of the world and applied this learning and acceptance to their home communities.

Overall, the economic, sociological, and psychological ramifications of traveling on short-term service-learning trips prove to be advantageous overall. The results confirm that the trips are well worth the money, strongly support others, and strong relationships are built within the team and with partners around the world.

Cultural Artifacts

Seven categories of cultural knowledge are detailed by Sachau, Brasher, and Fee (2010) and they include the following: free will, sources of truth, time, human nature, work relationships, purpose of work, and communications. As university programs design service-learning projects, these researchers encouraged professors to be prepared to focus on these categories as well as what the goals of the program are in relation to the culture studied. Every short-term service-learning trip should have a specific purpose and these categories of reflection may help guide trip planners and organizers. Reflective thoughts and statements surrounding each category support these areas:

Free will – the ability to control fate, what hardships can be tolerated in any given situation

Sources of truth – how is truth determined and how does it play out in different contexts such as religion, mysticism, science, and traditions

Time – past, present, and future decisions and how they impact life and schedules in life

Human nature – individualist cultures versus collectivist cultures – how do each contribute to purpose in life

Work relationships – formal, familial, and status-oriented cultures – how are they different and how do they contribute to overall well-being in life

Purpose of work - competition, growth, balance in work life, extrinsic rewards – how do humans in different cultures value each

Communications – verbal and non-verbal communication differences in cultures – how are they valued

Support of Individuals

The value of developing and nurturing relationships with people around the world was highlighted by medical students in the Merkey and Palombi (2020) study of a trip to Nicaragua. Building relationships of trust where patients feel comfortable telling the service-learning volunteer about their medical issues was an important part of this trip. Likewise, this further proves to adolescent and young adult volunteers that individuals in foreign countries feel seen and supported when others travel to their countries to support and volunteer. These actions matter and demonstrate the importance and value of purpose in adolescent and young adult lives as they seek to learn more about a community and support individuals.

CONCLUSION

The benefits of participating on a short-term service-learning trip include contributing to the local economy, increasing awareness of different cultures and populations of people around the world, and strengthening mental health by adding emotional maturity, self-confidence, and a richer spiritual life through relationships with a diverse group of people. “Faith-based mission trips combine global travel with worship, evangelism and volunteerism. . .while also immersing themselves in prayer, study and transnational faith relationships (Hopkins, Olson, Smith, & Laurie, 2015: 388).

A strong cross-section of individuals participate in service-learning trips, but the vast majority of people are adolescents and especially young adults who participate through their universities. Universities allow students from all majors to participate and they travel for numerous different reasons – both academic and non-academic. This particular study expanded on the short-term service-learning projects and

further highlighted the benefits of international travel for those who may not be able to give up family and employment obligations for global learning opportunities.

In addition, the local community enjoyed supporting the service-learning trip participants "including appreciation for the concern shown by visitors for underserved people" (Mantey, Doh, Lasker, Alang, Donkor, & Aldrink, 2021: 2). Thus, the benefits of short-term service-learning trips far outweigh the negatives and build compassion, empathy, and a stronger sense of self as teens and young adults discover their strengths and how to best use them to make a difference in the world. This adds great purpose to the lives of the young participants and builds community between vastly different regions in the world. It also may increase their possibilities of better job options in the United States by demonstrating their willingness to serve others in another part of the world as well as learning about their own culture and what they believe. This is a value of Americans and one that supports young adults in their quest to further their careers.

REFERENCES

Anderson, S. E., Kim, R., & Larios, K. (2017). Voluntourism: The economic benefit and societal costs of short-term mission trips. *International Journal of Health and Economic Development, 3* (2), 28–37.

Carlson, D. (2019). I'd probably still cancel your short-term mission trip. *International Mission News,* 1–7.

Hensley, R. D. (2016). Does theory translate in the trenches of short-term mission work? *Journal of Health Ethics, 12* (2). http://dx.doi.org/10.18785/ojhe.1202.04

Hildreth, D. S. (2023). Making short-term mission trips count. *Discipleship & Evangelism,* 1–6.

Hopkins, P., Olson, E., Smith, M. B., & Laurie, N. (2015). Transitions to religious adulthood: Relational geographies of youth, religion, and international volunteering. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 40,* 387–398.

Huang, L. (2019). Short-term mission trips: Developing the racial and ethnic consciousness of White participants. *Journal of Society and Christianity, 9* (2), 55–73.

Johnson, L. A. (2014). Can short-term mission trips reduce prejudice? *The Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society, 4* (1), 10–22.

Mantey, E. E., Doh, D., Lasker, J. N., Alang, S., Donkor, P., & Aldrink, M. (2021). Ghanian views of short-term medical missions: The pros, cons, and the possibilities for improvement. *Globalization and Health, 17* (115), 1–14.

Merkey, R. J., & Palombi, L. C. (2020). Student reported value of a short-term service-learning trip to Nicaragua. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning, 12* (1), 49–57.

Nagel, C. (2021). Christian short-term missions: Creating global citizens? *Geopolitics, 26* (5), 1286–1306.

Olsen, A., & McNeel, B. (2019). Don't paint the orphanage: After years of debate over the merits of short-term missions, what are we left with? *Christianity Today,* 33–39.

Pierson, M. R., & Pierson, B. E. (2021). The pandemic's effect on children globally: A brief perspective. *Journal of Gender and Power, 16* (2), 9–14.

Pierson, M. R., Pierson, B. E., &Tsyrlina-Spady, T. (2023). Supporting youth in Ukraine during the Russian invasion. *Journal of Gender and Power, 19* (1), 1–7.
Sachau, D., Brasher, N., & Fee, S. (2010). Three models for short-term study abroad. *The Journal of Management Education, 34* (5), 645–670.
Simmelink, M., (2015). A deeper mission: Making short-term service more effective. *America,* 25–26.
Stout, B., & Wescher, L. (2017). An empirical assessment of the effects of cohort training and follow up on the outcomes of short-term missions. *Journal of Sociology and Christianity, 7* (1), 22–44.
The Open Doors Report (2025).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Melinda R. Pierson, Ph.D. is a professor in the College of Education at California State University, Fullerton. Her research areas of focus include effective practices in teacher training, supporting international education communities, and literacy education around the world. She has trained teachers in 15 countries and taken over 100 future educators with her on service learning trips around the world.

Brooke Pierson is an elementary teacher candidate with a focus on disability studies at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, California. She has worked in schools around the world and especially loves service learning trips to Africa where she supports students in extreme poverty.

Brett Pierson is completing his master's degree in International Affairs and Leadership at Arizona State University. He is currently participating in a leadership institute in Global Compassion at Eastside Christian Church where he is supporting humanitarian projects in Chile, Kenya, Thailand, and Mexico. He plans to earn a doctorate in Global