

Maximizing International Students' Service-Learning and Community Engagement Experience: A Case Study of Student Voices on the Benefits and Barriers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify actual and perceived barriers and benefits of engaging in service-learning and volunteering activities as identified from the unique perspective of international students. Through the identification of barriers and benefits, we can provide more informed training to international students and provide a foundation for best practices to the community-based organizations that host them as volunteers and service-learners. We gathered data through focus groups and short online surveys of both the study population and community partner-based organizations. The findings of this study providing the authentic experiences and perspectives of international students, can assist service-learning institutions and organizations worldwide to better prepare international students for a service-learning experience and reduce the number of barriers faced. Practices and services are recommended to help international students complete their volunteer/service-learning endeavors, and to provide a more welcoming atmosphere for this student population to engage in their communities through service-learning.

Keywords: International students, Community engagement, Diversity, Internationalization

Introduction

The number of international students entering universities in the United States has seen a consistent increase over the past 10 years. These students provide a rich diversity of thought and skills to our learning environments and our workforce. However, they also experience unique barriers to learning and engaging on and off our campuses. Community engagement among international students has been shown to have a variety of positive outcomes for both the individual and the community at large. International students who have higher levels of contact with their local communities perform better academically and socially (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985), display lower stress levels (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993), and report increased satisfaction (Noels, Pon, & Clément,

1996). Conversely, when a community engages with international students, it helps its members develop social consciousness and overall cultural intelligence (*Parliament of South Australia, 2006*).

This study was conducted at a large research university in the Midwest (United States), where we are dedicated to fostering community engagement among our own international students. In order to achieve that, we need to understand the unique barriers and challenges these students face when becoming engaged in their host communities. For this study, we chose to focus on community engagement in terms of service-learning and volunteering. The university's Center for Community-Engaged Learning works with a wide range of students, organizations in our community who host students as volunteers or service-learners (we call them "community partners"), and university departments and their faculty members who elect to incorporate a service-learning component into their curriculum. The overall goal of this work is to provide meaningful volunteer experiences to the student population and to facilitate reciprocally rewarding experiences for community partner organizations and the service-learning participants placed within them.

In recent years, the Center for Community-Engaged Learning has seen a significant increase in the number of international students seeking volunteer advising appointments. These peer-led advising appointments gauge a potential student volunteer's interest in particular areas of volunteering (for example, volunteering with youth, animals, in nature, or in a health facility) and subsequently match them with several different placement options. During the sessions, the prospective volunteer or service-learner is given the contact details of the potential community-based placements, the different roles available within each placement, and a few other logistical details (background check requirements, pre-service training requirement, hours available, location, etc.).

Regardless of this increase in advising appointments, colleagues in the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) office have noted that international students are lacking appropriate experience for their résumés. Thus, the desire and/or requirement for international students to volunteer (or fulfill a service-learning requirement) as a way to gain experience is present; however, following through with volunteer activities and being able to note the experience on a résumé remains a challenge for international students. After hearing directly from several international students about the barriers they face in initiating and completing volunteer activities, the Center for Community-Engaged Learning decided

to place more emphasis on ensuring that international students have additional training opportunities and resources for community engagement, volunteering, and service-learning in hopes of reducing the number of barriers faced when engaging in their new communities and fulfilling the required volunteer hours if they are enrolled in a service-learning course at the university. Therefore, we engaged international students in focus group interviews in order to explore what their distinct barriers were (or what they perceived as barriers if they had not yet engaged in volunteering), as well as the actual and perceived benefits. Our purpose was to then use this information to enhance our training and share this research-based information with our community partners who host the volunteers, as well as other institutions working with international students in a community engagement/service-learning capacity, so they too can provide appropriately designed volunteer opportunities, training, and services to ensure international students are facing fewer barriers, are engaging more in their host communities, are completing their service requirements, and are having a more positive experience while doing so.

As previously mentioned, we can acknowledge the many challenges involved with being an international student. Some of those challenges include actual or perceived difficulties in securing student visas, rising tuition costs in the United States, and perceptions that international students may not be welcome in the United States (*Obst & Forster, 2005*). However, according to Thoits and Hewitt (2001), the act of volunteering positively impacts the well-being of the volunteer in a variety of ways, including happiness, life satisfaction, sense of control over life, physical health, and reducing depression. All these factors could possibly negate some of the challenges, and essentially give international students a feeling of connectedness to their new communities. Because of the feedback we received from ISSS and international students themselves, as well as these statistics indicating the significant benefits of engaging in volunteer activities, we want the experience of community engagement to be accessible, enjoyable, and beneficial to university students, regardless of national origin.

Overview of International Students at the University

An increasing number of international students are coming to the United States to pursue their education. In 2015–16, international student enrollment increased 7.1% to 1,043,839 students in total (*Open Doors, 2016*). These international students include

nonimmigrant international students in the United States on temporary visas.

During the 2015 fall semester at the university, 6,438 international students were enrolled; they represented over 130 countries and accounted for 13% of the entire student population on campus. The total international student population consisted of 43% undergraduate students, 48% graduate and professional students, and 9% non-degree-seeking students (*ISSS, 2016*).

Nationwide, international students have contributed to the U.S. economy three times what they did 15 years ago. In 2013–14, international students contributed over \$27 billion to the U.S. economy in tuition, books, room and board, travel, and other costs (*Open Doors, 2014*). Beyond their economic contribution, international students are viewed as an asset. “There can be no global citizenship without considering people from other countries and, in this case, without foreign students being a part of this,” as stated by Mestenhauser (2011, p. 275), who was emphasizing the value international students will contribute to the internationalization of U.S. higher education, as well as the fostering of intercultural competency development among students, staff, and faculty across campus in postsecondary education settings.

Given the large population of international students at the university, and in consideration of their vast contributions to our broader society, we felt the need to give a voice to them, and to hear what they had to say about community engagement in the form of volunteering and service-learning.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university. The confidentiality of human subjects was strictly protected, and the process of conducting this study strictly followed proposed protocol. The study population for this focus group research was derived from interested international students at the university. The International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) program was instrumental in helping to identify and inform students who would potentially be interested in participating and who met the student population criteria for our study: degree-seeking students who were currently enrolled at the university and whose origin was from a country other than the United States (identified as international students by the university’s standards).

Participant Recruitment Approach

As previously mentioned, we partnered with ISSS to both identify potential participants and reach out to them. ISSS has a particular approach for recruiting students, and we used this same practice for our recruitment purposes. After we identified the entire population of potential participants, a general e-mail about the opportunity to participate in our focus group was sent out. If interested, students were requested to respond to a short online questionnaire to help us generate maximum diversity among participants. The questionnaire requested the name of the student; e-mail address; identified gender (optional); age range; country of origin; declared or anticipated major; if they had previous experience volunteering in the United States; and if they declined participation, wanted to join the focus group, or needed more information about the research before they could decide. From those responses we confirmed interest, grouped students, and invited them to one of the planned focus groups.

Demographics of the Selected Student Population

Out of the 62 students who answered the brief online questionnaire and showed initial interest, we selected 28 students to invite to our focus groups. Five of those students had something unexpected occur the day of the focus groups and could not attend, so our total focus group participants numbered 23. We divided these students into four different focus groups, electing to balance gender, country of origin, and reported volunteer experience (or lack thereof).

As indicated, there were a handful of questions asked in pre-screening stages that allowed us to identify initial interest. From those initial screening questions, we asked the students to identify their preferred gender. Although this was an optional question, all students chose to answer. Therefore, we know that 14 participants identified as female and 9 participants identified as male. Below is a breakdown of other demographics, including reported age (Table 1), previous volunteer experience (Table 2), country of origin, and declared areas of study (Table 3).

Table 1. Participant Age

| Age Range | Number |
|-------------|--------|
| 18–20 years | 9 |
| 21–23 years | 8 |
| 24–25 years | 5 |
| 26+ years | 1 |

Table 2. Prior Volunteer Experience

| Number Reporting Prior Experience (N = 23) | % of Total |
|--|------------|
| Yes = 13 | 56.5% |
| No = 10 | 43.5% |

Countries of Origin

The countries represented in this study include (in alphabetical order) Belarus, China, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Mexico.

Table 3. Declared/Anticipated Focus of Study

| Declared Major by College | Number of Participants in Each |
|---|--------------------------------|
| College of Liberal Arts (CLA) | 7 |
| College of Science and Engineering (CSE) | 7 |
| Carlson School of Management | 1 |
| College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences | 1 |
| Graduate School | 3 |
| Combination of CLA and CSE | 4 |

Findings

To start our focus group discussions, we asked the participants several lead-in questions. These questions were designed to gauge their understanding of and experience with the terms to be later discussed, mainly *volunteering* and *service-learning*. In the beginning stages of the focus groups, we asked three questions: What does volunteering mean to you? Have you ever volunteered? Have you participated in service-learning? All participants knew of or had engaged in volunteering, but less than half of the participants knew of or had engaged in service-learning. Below is a collection of the thoughts expressed when asked the introductory questions, as well as the remaining focus group questions.

Please note that throughout the entirety of this research analysis, the terms “students,” “participants,” and “focus group/study participants” will be used interchangeably, as the study group criteria dictated that all participants in the study must also be degree-seeking students enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate courses.

What Does Volunteering Mean to You?

When international students were asked what volunteering meant to them, the main themes articulated revolved around several different ideas. They thought volunteering was overall less formal than a job or an internship and was something to be done without pay. They also mentioned it was a contribution of their knowledge, skills, and/or time. They said it was an opportunity for personal growth and to learn new things and get new ideas. Some thought it was part of their responsibility in life- that they were “giving back” or participating in “work of goodwill.” Many also viewed it as a social opportunity: a chance to make friends and participate in activities/events that were different from their typical life/activities on campus. Some of the previous volunteer activities mentioned by the students included tutoring, helping the homeless population, assisting the elderly, constructing housing, working at an animal shelter, and volunteering in a hospital. These examples were a combination of volunteer experiences the study population had experienced abroad and in the United States.

Perceived or Actual Benefits

Skill development. This was the most vocalized theme, as many participants felt that volunteering or engaging in their host communities helped them gain knowledge and develop a variety of skills, including communication skills, social skills like empathy, team-building skills, and time management skills. In the words of one student, “You get a lot of knowledge and you kinda, you sympathize, you [become] more human.”

These participants connected the skills gained from volunteering with further benefits that included help in finding a job or being accepted to graduate school, improving English-language skills, increasing self-confidence, and gaining added awareness regarding future career choices (for example, identifying through volunteer experience which populations they would like to work with in the future).

Interaction/connection/friendship. Being able to connect with other students, form friendships, and work as a group were very important benefits of volunteering that international students expressed; in fact, it was the second most articulated theme with respect to benefits. Engaging with others, exchanging ideas, having a social experience, networking and getting to know more people, and achieving balance (having more activities outside the classroom/studying) were key factors they deemed very important aspects of volunteering. “It’s kind of helpful for myself to participate and engage in the community so I can have more identity and belonging and feel like I’m actually learning more about the community,” declared one participant. Another international student who had previous experience volunteering in the United States said, “I always have a strong feeling, a strong sense of belonging where I volunteer and I feel like it’s easier for me to make friends with people who volunteer with me. . . .”

A change in perspective. It was also very notable that international students felt that volunteering helped to change their perspective. One participant reported, “I think volunteering widens my perspective, it’s a good chance to meet people from all over the world . . . this is a good way to give the world our work, just a little bit.” One student contrasted the limited television and movie portrayals of America with the reality visible just off campus: “You see that it’s not all big houses and upper middle class.” Another said, “I was talking to a retired man last Saturday [while volunteering]; we were trimming some trees together and were together for four hours and he was sharing his point of view of the current United States and I don’t get to hear anything like that in the office.”

Reciprocal reward. A participant in one focus group said the benefits of volunteering and service-learning go beyond the constructs of monetary gain. Seeing the positive outcomes of your volunteer work “makes me feel good and proud of myself.” The reward is that you get to contribute to society, but the contribution is more of an exchange: “I didn’t teach them [adult learners who were immigrants preparing to take the U.S. citizenship test], I learned with them.” The words “sacrifice” and “service” were mentioned by participants, and were used in a positive light: “For volunteering, some people say you get nothing, but I think at least you gain some happiness or [life] lessons.”

Other benefits. There were two other themes mentioned in the focus groups, and those included “self-confidence” and “organizational knowledge” (for purposes of knowing an organization and having “insider information” before electing to work or participate

gainfully with them). Participants expressed that they could gain more confidence in their abilities, particularly those pertaining to language, communication, and belonging, as well as their talents and their physical abilities. As one student said,

I think another thing is we also know more, grow more of things that we didn't know before, like I never try to build a house before but I volunteered at Habitat [for Humanity] and it was so amazing that I can actually help to build the house!

Perceived or Actual Barriers

Going into this research, we anticipated that language and transportation would likely be the two most common barriers to volunteering for international students. These were, in fact, among the top five barriers identified, but surprisingly, there were several others we hadn't anticipated that posed a more significant level of hesitation among the participants. The top five themes that emerged collectively during the focus groups included the following: lack of time to devote to volunteering, logistics/rules involved in the process of volunteering, transportation (or lack thereof), cultural considerations, and language/communication barriers. Among the less common, but still noteworthy, barriers were a lack of self-confidence, ignorance of volunteer opportunities, safety and security issues, the absence of group opportunities, lack of monetary compensation, and a perception that there would be bias toward them. Below is a breakdown of each theme.

Time constraints. The issue of time materialized in each of the four separate focus groups. However, there were a few different ways in which the focus group participants described how time negatively impacted their ability or desire to volunteer, including time management and/or competing commitments—which would indicate the students were juggling multiple commitments and were not able to effectively incorporate volunteering; limited time or the absence of “extra time”—students reported their coursework was difficult and they did not have time outside their studies and other obligations to participate in volunteer activities; and time commitments required by the volunteer site—suggesting the amount of time they knew or thought organizations would require of them (daily/weekly/monthly) did not appeal to them or they were unable to commit.

Logistics/rules limitation. The complexity of the American volunteering system came up as a major theme in one focus group. The participants mentioned the tedious process of becoming a volunteer, which involved background checks, long applications and reference forms, many rules (for example: “You can’t give a gift to a child”), lessons and trainings before you can begin, and potentially the requirement of previous volunteer experience. This discussion also involved a comparison between several of the participants’ volunteer experiences in their country of origin and their experiences in the United States. One student stated, “Back home I could literally show up and say, ‘I want to volunteer’ and they let you help.”

Transportation challenges. There were a few different aspects of transportation that posed a threat to the prospect of community engagement through volunteering and service-learning as articulated by the focus group participants. Those aspects included transportation in general, the public transportation system, and the weather interfering with viable modes of transport.

Our specific university has student learning facilities located on two separate campuses. Much of the school year falls during the winter season, and certain modes of transport can be unpleasant, if not dangerous, when the temperatures plummet, the roads and sidewalks become icy, and/or the snow accumulates. International students, who rely primarily on walking, biking, or using the campus circulator (a train and bus system that transports students between campuses), are generally unable to freely and comfortably access their “go-to” modes of transport when these undesirable weather conditions exist. In addition, when students volunteer for an organization that is not located near campus, they must rely on the public transport system or carpooling with another student or faculty member who is volunteering at the same place and time as them.

Cultural considerations. Focus group discussions also addressed variations in the way cultures around the world view and execute volunteering. For example, one participant said, “In the U.S., volunteering is part of the culture, whereas in other countries it may not be that way. People might ask, ‘Why do you need to do that?’ and I might need to have an excuse to do it.” Another explained, “At home, people are used to foreigners coming to volunteer, but not natives; so when you are a native showing up to help, people are confused.” Examples of different approaches to executing volunteering were represented in statements such as “[Where I live] most volunteer opportunities were related to helping the poor, but here we actually have different kinds of volunteering . . . that can

actually help you instead of helping someone else” and “In the U.S., volunteering is more organized and therefore more sustainable.”

The participants also mentioned that in the United States there were people of all ages volunteering; there were opportunities in a variety of settings; there was more training offered or required before engaging; there are universities helping to facilitate the process of volunteering, as well as websites and contact numbers so the opportunities are more publicized; volunteering as an individual is more common than volunteering as a group (as several mentioned was more common in their countries of origin); and the time commitment in the United States is often much greater.

Although this was not explicitly stated in each of the focus groups, we surmise that students who perceive a large variety of volunteer opportunities in the United States had the opposite experience in their home countries: limited options. Likewise, for those who expressed the tediousness of the U.S. volunteer system, they found volunteering in their native country less bureaucratic. In another example, students who reported that volunteering in the United States often required a large time commitment may have experienced volunteering abroad as more flexible and less time intensive.

Language/communication barriers. We know that communication is often tricky among people of the same mother tongue. There is opportunity for misunderstanding in every conversation based on context or lack of consistency with accompanying non-verbal communication. Therefore, it wasn't surprising to us that communication and/or language surfaced in each focus group as a common concern/barrier. Some students elaborated, saying they were concerned about others not being able to understand their accent: “I am afraid that my English is not good enough for kids.”

Other barriers. “Before I go, I was think[ing] about will they accept me because I'm an international student, will they treat me differently, and there are other volunteers, maybe they are all American and will they want to get along with me.” This statement is a mutual reflection of perceived bias and potential lack of confidence, both of which were areas of concern for some of the participants (lack of confidence in one's own abilities having been mentioned three times during the collective focus group activities, and perceived bias having materialized as a concern twice).

Along with the aspects of potential bias mentioned above, the issues of lack of knowledge of volunteer opportunities and safety were also mentioned as concern areas twice during the focus group

sessions. Even though international students verbalized that volunteer opportunities in the United States are more promoted, they still found it somewhat difficult to find those they could engage in. And even if they were aware of volunteer opportunities, either they or members of their families were concerned about safety. One participant commented, “My parents are worried about me going to strange places to volunteer.”

Statistically of least concern, but still noteworthy, is that our focus group participants also named “lack of group volunteer opportunities” and “no monetary gain” as barriers for them. Even though different groups identified the absence of pay as a factor that most significantly defined volunteering and service-learning, it appeared as if the inclusion of some form of pay could have resulted in increased motivation to engage. Likewise, students in a few different focus groups mentioned they would be more comfortable and therefore more willing to participate in community engagement activities if they were able to do so with friends or in a group, instead of individually.

Retention or Reenrollment

The question “If you have volunteered before, will you do it again, regardless of the challenges?” was asked during each of the four focus group sessions; it followed the discussion of barriers. One student stated, “It’s always good to learn new things while volunteering,” and another mentioned they would check to see if transportation was provided. The overall consensus, however, was yes, the participants would volunteer regardless of the challenges. It should be noted that two barriers seemed to pose a more serious threat to the students’ ability/desire to volunteer, and those were time and transportation. The other barriers—communication, language, lack of confidence, and so on—may cause a bit of anxiety but didn’t necessarily negate all perceived or actual benefits.

Previous Volunteer Experience (Including Service-Learning)

As indicated above, 13 students reported having had previous volunteer experience on their answers to the initial online questionnaire, whereas 10 reported not having had any volunteer experience prior to the focus group. This online questionnaire did not differentiate between volunteering in their country of origin versus volunteering in the United States, nor did it differentiate between volunteering and service-learning as part of a curriculum.

However, during the focus group conversations, the participants were asked about their previous volunteer experience, with further inquiry to determine where it took place and what type of institution it was with, as well as who had participated in service-learning.

Students who reported volunteering in the States described opportunities that included spring break service trips, ESL tutoring, animal shelter assisting, building for Habitat for Humanity, various services at the American Cancer Society and homeless shelters, food packing services at Feed My Starving Children, and outdoor activities, including maple tree tapping. As described by the students, volunteering in their countries of origin involved opportunities primarily in schools, museums, orphanages, homes for the elderly, churches, and hospitals. Overall, students reported the depth and breadth of volunteer opportunities as being greater in the United States.

Of the 23 focus group participants, only five outwardly expressed having been involved in volunteering specifically as part of a course, or what we consider "service-learning." During one focus group, it was clear there was limited understanding among the participants with respect to what service-learning entailed. For those who had previous experience with it, they reported having participated as part of the following courses: Cultural Psychology, Public Health, and ESL.

The focus group participants were also asked where and/or with whom they were most interested in engaging in volunteer activities, and here are their responses (in no particular order): children, health care, refugees, animals, politics, media, environment, social justice and human rights, and equality. In comparison, among the organizations where Americans chose to volunteer, religious organizations tend to be the most popular. In terms of volunteer activities, American volunteers most often participated in fundraising (26.6%); collecting, preparing, distributing, or serving food (23.5%); engaging in general labor or providing transportation (20.5%); and tutoring or teaching (19.0%) (*Corporation for National and Community Service, 2010*). Therefore, it would appear that international students have different interest areas when it comes to volunteering, as well as unique barriers and skills they provide.

Best Times for Volunteer Events and Best Modes of Communication

Our aim with this question was to determine the best means of communication for international students, as well as times when

they were most available and willing to engage in volunteer activities, so we, in turn, could make recommendations to agencies who recruit volunteers. However, we received conflicting information, which suggests personal preference is a significant factor when it comes to receiving information relating to engagement opportunities or events. Although one focus group said they would like to see flyers posted in public areas, another stated it was bad for the environment to generate paper material to advertise. The same group that was in favor of flyers said they would also be accepting of e-mails, phone calls, social media messages (if they were up to date), word of mouth, service-learning courses, and face-to-face interactions like information sessions. Another focus group said that e-mails would be acceptable but that multiple e-mails about the same event or opportunity were unwelcome, as it overwhelms the recipient and causes them to discontinue checking e-mails from that source. This group recommended department calendars or newsletters as an alternative.

With respect to the time and day that lent itself to the most availability or willingness to engage, we received more consistent responses from focus group to focus group. The majority said that weekend activities were most desirable because they have more time to focus on extracurricular activities during that time. Two groups mentioned that evenings were also acceptable if they weren't taking night classes. And one focus group mentioned that blocks of time, like summer or winter breaks, would be a time they were free and willing to volunteer.

Discussions

We have already established that international students bring a richness to our communities, our schools, and our economy. They represent diversity of thought and contribute to aspirations of a global society where we can work together to achieve common goals and prosperity. For those reasons, and many more, we feel it's both our privilege and our responsibility to assist in breaking down barriers faced in terms of community engagement. Therefore, we present a few important observations that we emphasize in hopes that universities and community partner organizations worldwide will take the necessary steps to facilitate this change process.

One important aspect that international students brought to our attention was the desire to pair community engagement activities with friendship and relationship-building. We knew going into this research that time, transportation, and language were likely

going to be barriers to engagement, and these factors, along with many others, were confirmed. However, from a learning perspective, one of the most helpful pieces of information we received was that of relationship-building. In all the focus groups there were one or more participants who acknowledged the social aspect of volunteering/service-learning as a benefit, and several international students articulated feeling more confident and comfortable engaging when group volunteering was an option.

Through this research, we also learned that the process of community engagement can often be daunting for international students. We fully comprehend the need for volunteer organizations to have safety as their main priority. We also understand that safety measures involve ensuring the volunteers' backgrounds are free from criminal activities (especially if the client population is composed of vulnerable people, as most are). However, it is worthy to note that international students have already gone through a lengthy background check just to enter the United States and furthermore to be admitted to study in this country. Therefore, assisting potential international volunteers with the logistical process of becoming a volunteer, while not compromising the safety of served populations, will certainly prove beneficial for all involved.

Finally, in speaking with our study group population, we have identified common perceived and actual benefits of volunteering. These include skill development, gaining new perspectives, fulfilling a responsibility to serve others, increased confidence, organizational knowledge, and development of new connections and friendships. A study conducted by Smith et al. (2010) provides a large-scale international survey comparing university students in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States who identified the following as benefits of volunteering: job/career experience, reference for employment or college, leadership skills, professional networking, service requirements (which all fell under the theme "instrumental/career-related"), self-satisfaction, opportunities to learn new things, building trust among people in society (part of the "altruistic/value-driven" category), social contacts, and recognition from friends/colleagues (indicated as "social/ego"-related reasons). Additionally, a study of university students in England found that respondents gave a variety of reasons for volunteering: to help someone in their community, to learn new skills, to respond to their needs or skills, and to help gain experience to benefit their future career (Holdsworth, 2010).

Therefore, it appears there are altruistic, social, and operant benefits associated with volunteering, as identified by students from a variety of nations worldwide. However, although these countries represent geographic diversity, they share some commonalities in their volunteer sectors, as well as political, social, and cultural histories (*Smith et al., 2010*). With this in mind, we encourage communities and organizations who are hosting international students to focus on the similarities shared by international and domestic students alike while trying to alleviate some of the distinctive barriers faced more overtly by the international student population.

Community Partners' Perspectives on Hosting International Student Volunteers and Service-Learners

Through conducting a short, four-question online survey with our community partners, we learned that there was overall a high level of satisfaction with having international students be part of their work. After sending out the survey link to each of the community partner organizations who receive our newsletter, we collected information from over 40 respondents. In the brief survey, the following questions were asked: How many international students do you work with each semester? What assets do they bring? What is the major challenge you face as you host international student volunteers? What can our center do to help address any concerns/questions you, as a community partner, have when working with international students?

In total, 42 of our community partner organizations had a representative from their organization answer the online survey questions. When asked how many international students they work with each semester, the majority noted it was between one and three, with that majority accounting for over 57% of our community partners. Almost 20% of the 42 partners do not work with international students at all; close to 12% work with four to six international students each semester; and the remaining 12% work with seven or more each semester.

Of the 20% who never work with international students, the reasons were not directly specified, but in the comments section some agencies noted that the topic of their work could have been off-putting to international students, or they imagine international students felt very uneasy about their own skills when volunteering for them. For example, if the only position available is that of a tutor, international students may not have enough confidence in

their language skills to fulfill that role and therefore would not opt to volunteer within that organization.

Not surprisingly, when it came to inquiries about the barriers in working with international students, community partners mentioned a language barrier being the most common issue, which accounted for 70% of responses. The second most common barrier was that of transportation issues, which represented 40% of responses. Nine and eight respondents respectively chose "limited understanding of how to connect with international student" and "cultural considerations (female students not being able to work with males and vice versa, clothing, dominant role practices, eye contact or lack thereof, etc.)," which accounted for just over and just under 20% respectively.

Within the topic of barriers in this short survey, our center wanted to broach the topic of bias or discrimination against or by international students. The questions were not intended imply that this was happening, but we wanted to provide a space for our community partners to discuss this if it was a reality. Furthermore, we wanted to gauge how big an issue this might be so we could respond accordingly. Interestingly, around 7% of respondents said international students faced bias and/or discrimination perpetrated by the populations served at their organization (the clients, service recipients, members, etc.), but none of the community partners responded that bias and/or discrimination against international students was perpetrated by other student volunteers or by staff at their organizations.

Jill Suttie (2016) has suggested several ways to reduce bias, namely creating cross-cultural friendships and developing empathy:

When people see cross-group friendships working out in positive ways, they tend to be more willing to engage in cross-group friendships themselves. In addition, positive cross-group friendships can have contagion effects in other people within social groups, turning whole communities into warmer, more receptive spaces for cross-group interactions. . . . Developing friendships can be one of the best ways to break down barriers of prejudice, and it's more easily done when people have some common interests. (*Section 4, paras. 3-5*)

In addition, actively engaging in empathy decreases the likelihood of falling prey to stereotyping others (Suttie, 2016). Given this

information, we can then assume an opportunity for growth in the next question we posed. In their responses, over 21% of community partner respondents acknowledged having limited understanding of how to “connect” with international students. This certainly makes relationship-building difficult.

Perhaps the most interesting conclusions from this brief survey came from responses to the question “What assets do international students add to your organization or the work you do with the community?” The options available to respondents included the following, and they were not limited to selecting only one answer: genuine interest in the work you do or the populations you serve/work with; a new/different perspective that helps your agency grow; a familiar face for your clients/members/learners/service recipients to connect with (if the volunteer is from the same country of origin as the service recipient is); a new/different skill-set needed within your agency; dependability; adaptability; competence. For this question, 29 of the 42 respondents, almost 70%, said that international students’ biggest asset was a genuine interest in the work that was being done or the populations that were being served. In addition, 57% said they came with new and different perspectives that helped the agency grow; 45% said they added a familiar face for the population receiving services; and almost 24% of the respondents said international students had a new or different set of skills that were needed to support the agency.

Finally, our center wanted to know how we could best address some of the concerns our community partners have with respect to working with international students. Our community partners thought the most valuable service would be to develop and facilitate a training that would be available to them once per semester. According to 45% of community partner respondents, developing and distributing material on the topic would be useful, as well as including “helpful tips/strategies” in our monthly electronic newsletter.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The authentic experience of international students analyzed in this study has broadened the understanding of international students’ true challenges and concerns participating in service-learning and community service. After this study, the university, which was already implementing preparatory trainings for service-learning students, started to implement trainings specifically for international students that addressed their unique barriers. These

trainings were often evaluated highly by the attendees, who indicated it was helpful in preparing them for their volunteer/service-learning experience.

Recommendations for the University and Staff Supporting International Students

Here are some recommendations to be included in student training/preparation for university and relevant staff to better support international students to navigate the service-learning and volunteering process from start to finish:

1. Acknowledging the core benefit of service-learning is the reciprocal reward; highlighting that service-learning opportunities are designed to enhance the student's classroom learning by connecting the theoretical with the practical, while also addressing community needs. Additional benefits include skill development, résumé-building, gaining knowledge of community organizations, and meeting other students with similar interests.
2. Conceptualizing local community engagement: for example, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service, the level of volunteering in our Midwestern university community is considered typical, in that more than 40% of the population has reported volunteering (2010), and college-aged students are engaging with their communities at rates similar to the general population—38.3% (2015).
3. Explaining the service-learning process, step by step, including the online process and the peer-led advising appointments. This can include mock advising appointments, in-person demonstrations, or online modules designed to clarify the process.
4. Exploring how to connect with organizations, including example questions to ask the organization and questions the organization may ask the student.
5. Identifying how to address the need for references and background checks (specifically, which documents suffice in the absence of a Social Security number).
6. Accessing public transportation, including etiquette/rules, and going through the online process of determining cost and route.
7. Giving examples of what to expect while they are volunteering, including scenarios that student volunteers have

experienced, how to respond, and whom to contact for help.

8. Offering take-home material, for example, an *International Student Guide to Volunteering* that outlines additional pertinent information.

The preparatory trainings (one for students with little to no volunteer experience and one for students who have much volunteer experience) that were already offered at the university for service-learning students prior to this study, and were not specific to international students, included the following elements: introduction of the training (the purpose of the training is to develop skills of observation and reflection in order to identify how the service-learner is meeting a need in the community as well as enhancing their corresponding classroom learning); introduction of the students; discussion of goals and perceived challenges in service; case scenarios (group discussions regarding how to handle diverse volunteer situations); discussions regarding how we frame our perceptions; and exercises to broaden perspectives of common issues faced by the populations the students may work with during service.

During preservice training, students with vast volunteer experience are asked to reflect in greater detail about the impact that community work has had on them and on others. Some examples include discussions about deep versus shallow service experiences and reflections on the meaning of service and how others/society may perceive service (i.e., does everyone deserve to be helped? Is community service always good?). Again, students responded favorably to these trainings and evaluated them as highly beneficial.

Recommendations for the Agencies Hosting International Students

We would also like to encourage the volunteer host agencies to do any of the following in order to facilitate a better engagement experience for international students:

1. Create new opportunities within your organization for international (and all) students to volunteer as a group. Allow volunteers time for chatting and getting to know each other before they jump into their volunteer roles. If student volunteers are developing relationships among themselves, they will become more interdependent within the volunteer circle and less dependent on the staff within the organization.

2. Elicit an international student volunteer to contribute to your newsletters or internal communications. Include an introduction of the student, whether they have previous volunteer experience, what they are most looking forward to, and what they are nervous about. In doing so, your audience (most likely those who will be working with the student) will feel as if they are “getting to know” this student; they may develop a connection to the similarities between themselves and the student; and it will hopefully decrease any potential ambivalence there might be in working with international students.
3. If you have strict policies regarding the recruitment and acceptance of volunteers, consider that international students have already gone through a rigorous background check in order to enter and study in the United States. As an organization hosting international volunteers, perhaps consider offering advice and support for the background check process. Students may be unfamiliar with the reasons why this is necessary (although at our university preservice trainings we do mention the purpose of background checks), so offering extra assistance in this matter may increase a student's interest in your agency.
4. If you are part of an organization that has only one position (for example, a tutor) that could possibly be considered off-putting to an international student, try thinking outside the box and come up with a project that an international student could head where the students are using skills other than language or communication to help in your organization. These things take a bit more time up front, but doing so might not only attract more international students to your organization, but also cause them to stay for a longer period, which is something that the majority of organizations desire: long-term volunteers.
5. Finally, truly consider how your organization might be able to engage with international student volunteers in ways that are more meaningful to them and in ways that address the unique barriers they face.

It's our hope that this combined information, from both students and community partners, will help our center, centers like ours globally, and our partners in the community who are hosting international students in a variety of ways. For our audience, the international students themselves, the information likely to be

most valuable will lie within addressing the issue of self-confidence. When international students become aware that they are valuable for the vast variety of reasons mentioned above, perhaps we can help to facilitate more engagement in the mutually beneficial activities involved in volunteering and service-learning. After all, at the heart of the service-learning pedagogy is the component of reciprocally rewarding experiences and relationships.

Future Research Directions

During the compilation of this essay, we strove to be inclusive of relevant data already collected by researchers in the field, as well as to present new findings from our unique research study. However, in the process, we discovered gaps in both our research and previous research. Therefore, our essay has some limitations that offer opportunities for future research. Below are some of the areas we have identified for future research opportunities.

First, there is an opportunity for research comparing the desire for more socialization in volunteering among domestic versus international students—is it truly unique to international students? We did not explore the aspect of socialization in volunteering within the domestic student population, nor did we find previous research in this area, so a comparison was not possible. Another opportunity for comparative research lies within the concept that barriers are unique to international students. Since we did not do a comparison of barriers expressed by international students versus domestic students, nor did we find prior research on the topic, this would be another important area for clarification.

Although we did find current research regarding domestic and international student views on the benefits of volunteering, which included a study conducted with a variety of international and domestic students examining their perceptions of the benefits of volunteering, this study did not compare international and domestic student views of benefits. Therefore, we know the expressed benefits of international and domestic students *collectively* but not in comparison to one another. This presents an area of opportunity.

Additional research can also be performed surrounding preference for volunteer activities among international students and domestic students. Although our study loosely defined interest areas, it did not address preferences of international students, nor were we able to compare specific volunteer activity categories, as they were different from study to study. Finally, more in-depth

research can be focused on the types of bias and discrimination faced by international students from a community partner perspective; similarly, opportunities exist for a comparison between the bias and discrimination faced by international volunteers versus domestic volunteers.

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