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“Did It Change Your Life?”: An Evaluation of Student Growth on Western Washington University International Service-Learning Programs

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*“Did It Change Your Life?”: An Evaluation of Student Growth on Western Washington
University International Service-Learning Programs*

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INTRODUCTION

Western Washington University (WWU) offers an array of study abroad opportunities that attract 500-600 students annually. Approximately 44% of students who go abroad choose to do so through Western's faculty-led Global Learning Programs (ACE Internationalization Council, 2014). Many of these programs include a service learning element, which is defined as an educational experience where students (1) engage in a service activity that benefits community members, and (2) gain insight into course content, personal values, and civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher, 2011). As more students continue to participate in these international service-learning (ISL) programs, it is important to ensure that they are meeting these goals. This study focuses specifically on student learning. The purpose is to evaluate the impact of three service-learning study abroad programs at WWU through a survey administered to several cohorts of these programs over the past six years. Pre and post trip self-assessment questionnaires are used to analyze student growth in topics related to global citizenship.

PROGRAMS ASSESSED IN THIS STUDY

This study assesses seven interdisciplinary, faculty-led service learning fieldtrips led between 2011 and 2016. These trips are upper-division courses for which students received 15 credits. Cohorts of 10-13 students, two faculty members, and oftentimes a staff person participated in a 40-hour pre-trip orientation, approximately seven weeks abroad, and two weeks of post trip activities, including a social action project. The seven student cohorts participated in one of three programs. While each program differed in its location and main focus, they all shared a similar course structure, and the same lead faculty instructor, Dr. Elizabeth Mogford, with a different second instructor each year. The programs also shared the same overarching objectives: develop lasting, intercultural relationships built on mutual respect and reciprocity,

work with community partner organizations on their visions for change, examine ethical and practical questions raised by traveling, working, studying, and volunteering internationally, and develop a lasting commitment to social responsibility and change. A short description of each program is provided below.

Kenya: Social Justice and Society

Four of the seven cohorts analyzed participated in this program in 2011, 2013, 2014, and 2016. Students traveled to rural Kenya and Rwanda where they focused on relationship building, and sharing interests and values while learning about local culture, history and religion. Service learning activities included attending and teaching classes at local schools, facilitating a girls' leadership and empowerment program, and supporting local grassroots organizations.

India: Himalaya Cultures and Ecologies

Two of the cohorts participated in this program in 2014 and 2015. Students spent six weeks in one of the most remote human habitats on earth, where they studied community based conservation as well as Tibetan culture, history, religion, and language. To learn about how this culture adapts to climate change, students worked with a wildlife conservation organization and supported a village in creating artificial glaciers.

India and Nepal: Global Health in the Himalayas

In 2016, one of the analyzed cohorts participated in this program. Students spent one month each in Nepal and India where they studied public health and health care delivery with an emphasis on social determinants of health. Cohorts collaborated with local community partners to work on post-earthquake reconstruction in Nepal and learn about social justice working with Tibetan refugee activists in Dharamsala, India.

ETHICAL GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP PRE/POST SELF-ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Data were collected using a quantitative global citizenship survey. This self-assessment includes 61 statements separated into five distinct learning areas: 1) appreciation for diversity; 2) intercultural skills; 3) knowledge of global issues; 4) citizenship intentions; and 5) future plans (see a sample of the survey in the appendix). Table 1 gives examples of the types of statements in each learning area.

Table 1. Sample Survey Items

Learning Area Groups	Sample Likert Scale Statements Rated at Start and End of Program
Knowledge of Global Issues	"I can explain the causes of global poverty" "I have a strong interest in global affairs"
Intercultural Skills	"I have the skills to live successfully in an international setting" "I am able to fit in and respect different customs and traditions"
Appreciation of Diversity	"I am open to having my beliefs and values challenged" "I seek friendships with people from other cultural groups"
Future Plans	"How likely are you to attain and maintain fluency in a second language?" "How likely are you to participate in international service work?"
Citizenship Intentions	"How important to you is speaking up against social injustice?" "How important to you is voting in local, state and national elections?"

DATA AND METHODS

Paired pre and post trip surveys were collected from 67 students who traveled on one of seven WWU international service learning trips. Identical surveys were individually filled out by students before and after their time abroad. The pre survey was administered at the start of the first day of orientation and the post survey was completed during the final class meeting, both of which took place on campus. Data were gathered anonymously as students were only asked to include their Western ID number on the survey. Students rated themselves on a five-point Likert scale for every survey section except "citizenship intentions," which used a four-point scale. For

this analysis, the scores from the “citizenship intentions” items were rescaled to a fit a five-point scale for the purpose of comparing change across each of the five learning areas.

The pre and post survey data from all seven trips were collected into a database and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Paired sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether the mean difference between pre and post scores for each survey item were statistically different from zero. The relationship between the average pre-survey and post-survey scores across learning areas is visually represented by a scatter plot (Figure 1). The data were then used to calculate the average percentage change, pre-survey scores, and post survey scores for each pre-post item, and each learning area. These results are shown in Table 2.

RESULTS

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	COLUMN 1 Statistically Significant Pre-Post Change (Number and %)	COLUMN 2 Average Percent Increase in Pre-Post Means Across Learning Areas*	COLUMN 3 Pre-Survey Mean (1-5 scale)*	COLUMN 4 Post-Survey Mean (1-5 scale)*
Knowledge of Global Issues	12 out of 13 (92.31%)	23.37%	3.37	3.98
Intercultural Skills	7 out of 9 (77.78%)	15.83%	3.64	4.19
Appreciation of Diversity	7 out of 12 (58.33%)	13.67%	3.89	4.37
Future Plans	7 out of 10 (70%)	10.30%	3.72	3.92
Citizenship Intentions	11 out of 17 (64.71%)	6.16%	4.19	4.49
All Learning Areas	44 out of 61 (72.13%)	14.23%	3.66	4.18

*statistically significant items only, p<0.05

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for all five learning areas, shown in the rows. The bottom row shows the results for the entire survey. Column one shows the proportion and percentage of the items with statistically significant pre/post change. Overall, 44 out of 61 or

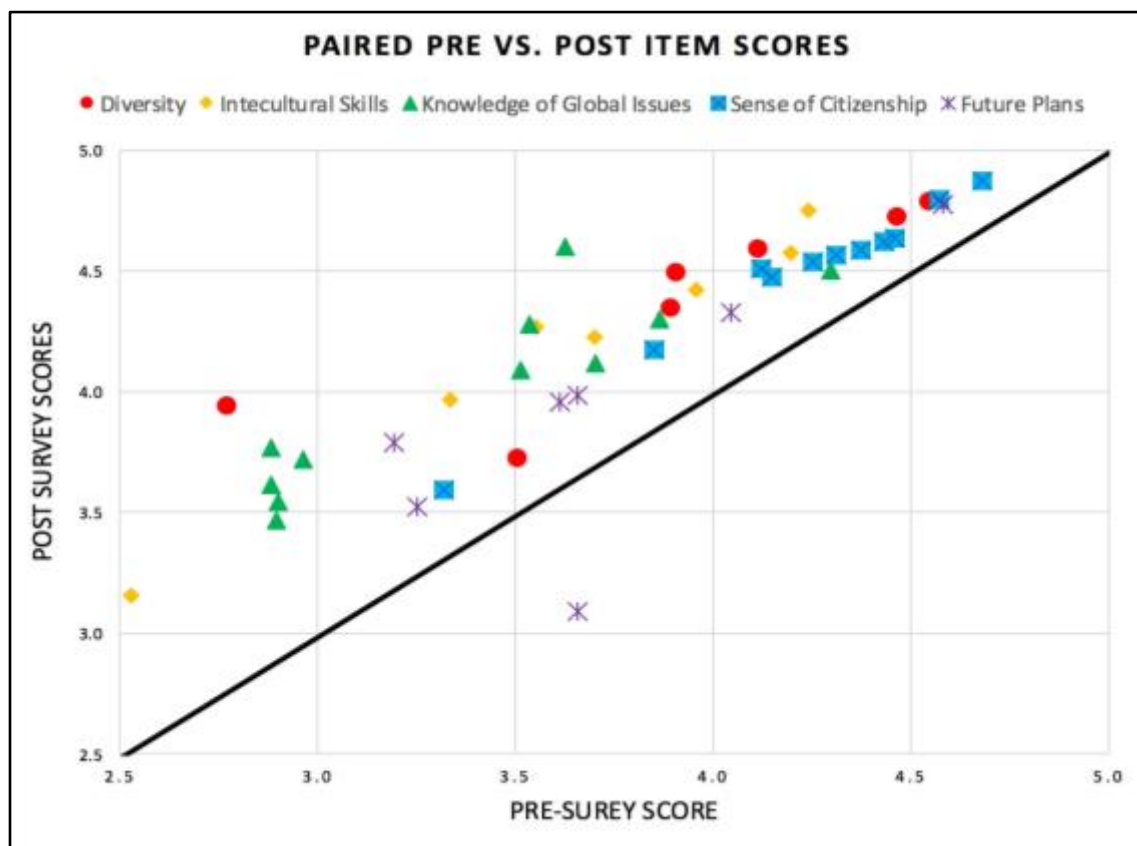
72.1% of the pre-post survey changes were statistically significant when measured at an alpha level of .05. This varied across learning areas. “Knowledge of global issues” had the greatest number of significant changes in means (92.3%) while the “appreciation of diversity” learning area had the least (58.3%). All other findings in this table include only the items with significant pre/post change in means.

Column 2 shows the average overall percentage increase in paired pre/post means across learning areas. The rows of learning areas are organized in ascending order by percentage increase. The average increase for the entire survey was 14.2%. Students reported the greatest overall learning in the “knowledge of global issues” learning area with an average increase of 23.4%, while the least pre/post change was in the “citizenship intentions” section with an average increase of 6.2%. The percentage change in the other three learning areas was close to the overall survey average.

Columns 3 and 4 display that average pre and post survey scores across learning areas. Students rated themselves on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 indicated “strongly disagree, “not at all likely”, or “not at all important, while 5 indicated “strongly agree”, “extremely likely”, or “essential to you.” At the start of the program, the average pre score of the whole survey was 3.7 out of 5. Students rated themselves highest in the “citizenship intentions” section which had an average pre-score of 4.2, and lowest in the “knowledge of global issues” section with an average score of 3.4. A comparison of column 2 (average percentage increase in pre/post means across learning areas) and column 3 (pre-survey means) shows that, in general, learning areas with low starting scores showed higher percentage increase, while learning areas with high starting scores showed lower percentage increase. After the trip, the average overall post-survey score increased to 4.2 out of 5. The “citizenship intentions” section continued to have the highest average score at 4.5, while the learning area with the lowest average score was “future plans” at 3.9.

To more easily visualize the increase in means for each paired pre/post item, each pair is plotted on a scatter plot, shown in Figure 1. Only paired items with statistically significant change are included. One outlier, from the “knowledge of global issues” section was removed in order to zoom in on the data. The X axis represents pre-survey scores, and the Y axis represents the post survey scores. Each point on the graph represents a plotted pre/post pair response, and is coded according to the learning area, as shown by the key. The black reference line bisecting the graph represents no change in means. Hypothetically, if students had identical pre and post scores on an item, the point would fall exactly on this line. Therefore, points that appear above or below the line represent an increase or decrease in score, respectively, after participating in the program. Furthermore, the further the points are from the reference line, the more the scores changed from the pre to the post survey.

Figure 1. Scatter plot



The graph shows that all items increased after the program, with the exception of one item from the “future plans” learning area. The majority of the points fall above a starting score of 3.5 and an ending score above 4.0. The graph also shows that items with higher starting scores generally showed less change from the pre to the post survey compared to items with lower starting scores. This is most apparent when comparing the “citizenship intentions” points (the blue squares) with the “knowledge of global issues” points (the green triangles). A majority of the “citizenship intentions” points had a starting score above 4.0 and are close to the black reference line, showing that they increased only a little in the post survey. The majority of the “knowledge of global issues” points, however, had a starting score below 4.0 and are further from the reference line, indicating higher pre/post increase.

The scatterplot also gives one an appreciation for the range of scores within each learning area. The points in each learning area are not all clustered together around the same starting and ending scores; there is variation in pre and post scores within each area. For instance, in the “intercultural skills” section (represented by the yellow diamonds), most points have a starting score between 3.3 and 4.0 and an ending score between 3.9 and 4.5. Yet the lowest scoring item has a pre-score of 2.5 and a post-score of 3.2, while the highest scoring item has a pre-score of 4.2 and a post-score of 4.7. The learning area with the least variation in scores seems to be the “citizenship intentions” area as a majority of the points are clustered around the high pre and post scores.

FINDINGS

Before leaving on their international service-learning trip, students initially ranked themselves high (4 or above) on items related to taking action for social change, and connecting with people who are different from themselves. This suggests that students with these goals and

values self-select into ISL programs. Students initially ranked themselves lower (under 3.5) on items related to specific knowledge and skills, showing they had room to grow in these areas.

After returning from their trips, students reported that, overall, their learning increased. Approximately three fourths of the survey items showed a statistically significant change in means from the pre to the post survey. Of these items, all but one pair increased in score after the trip. The amount of growth, however, differed across learning areas. The most change occurred in student “knowledge of global issues” and “intercultural skills”. These are the areas in which students initially rated themselves lower. Thus, students gained knowledge in areas in which they were not originally confident. Less change occurred in the areas of “citizenship intentions” and “appreciation of diversity.” However, the pre-survey scores in these areas already started high, so it is encouraging that they increased (not decreased) after the trips, if only by a small amount. This suggests that these programs confirmed the importance of citizenship and diversity in students’ lives.

There are some survey items that are particularly noteworthy. An item from the “citizenship intentions” category states *“I am interested in working to promote tolerance and respect for other nations.”* Students scored themselves highest on this item on both the pre and the post survey. It makes sense that this item started with a high score in the pre-survey as this interest is likely what would draw a student to an ISL program. It is encouraging to see that students are even more interested in promoting tolerance after returning from their trips.

An item from the “knowledge of global issues” section saw the largest percentage increase from the pre to post survey at 66%. This item stated *“I can give an example of how a cultural value and practice in my host country developed in response to global economic conditions.”* The data suggested that students could not readily provide an example of this before

participating in the program, and that the ISL courses were particularly effective in providing them with this information.

As previously mentioned, there was only one survey item with a significant pre/post decrease in score. This item was from the “future plans” section and stated “*I am likely to participate in a short term volunteer activity like a mission trip or Habitat for Humanity.*” This decrease may reflect the student’s increased knowledge of possible harms of “voluntourism” and suggest that they learned to value service experiences focused on long term relationships with local communities.

CONCLUSIONS

Results from the ethical global citizenship pre/post self-assessment survey show that the assessed programs increased student learning in all dimensions studied: skills, global citizenship, diversity, and citizenship intensions. The surveys also suggest that it is easier to effect change in some areas than others. For example, it seemed easier to teach students facts than inspire them to take action. However, since students already rated themselves high on taking action, this may indicate that they self-selected into these international service-learning programs. Results also give insights into areas where there is opportunity for improvement. The survey items with the most room for growth were those with moderate starting scores and moderate pre-post change. Students were originally moderately confident in these items and remained so after the program was over. Items with these scores span all five learning areas, so trip leaders should look at these specific items to decide if and how future programs might have greater impacts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In future studies, survey results should be compared to the results of a control group. This would show if the change in scores is really due to program participation, as well as reveal any

evidence of student self-selection. Future studies should also utilize qualitative data including course assignments like the social action project, written reflections, and student interviews. This data would likely offer further insight into how students understand their international experience and their subsequent growth. Lastly, more research needs to be done on the long term impacts of international service-learning programs on students. A follow up survey should be given to program alumni to learn their thoughts on their service-learning experience years later, and the impacts on their lives. This information can be combined with the data on the immediate impacts of the programs so that longitudinal analysis can be conducted.

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APPENDIX. Ethical Global Citizenship Pre/Post Self-Assessment Survey

Ethical Global Citizenship

Pre-Course Self-Assessment

Dear Student,

We are asking all of the participants in the _____ program to complete the following questionnaire at the beginning and end of this course. We ask that you think carefully about your responses, as they are very important to us and will help us assess the quality of this course.

Your responses are confidential and have nothing to do with evaluating your coursework. They will not be read until after the course. You will be identified by your student ID number so that we can compare your responses at the beginning and at the end of the class. All information from these questionnaires will be reported in aggregate form, i.e. as the average response of all students, and no one will be identified individually.

Please provide your WWU student ID number: _____

Directions: Please express the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements by circling one number. Remember that you are assessing your attitudes, knowledge and abilities now.

1. The first set of questions asks you to assess your familiarity and experience with cultural diversity in the US and in foreign settings

In the following scale, the number “1” means that you “strongly disagree” with the statement, while the number “5” means that you “strongly agree”. Circle one number for each statement that best represents where you are now on each dimension.

	strongly disagree			strongly agree	
a. I am aware of the origins of my cultural beliefs and values	1	2	3	4	5
b. I am knowledgeable about cultural diversity in the U.S.	1	2	3	4	5
c. I frequently interact with people from different cultural groups at home and/or on campus	1	2	3	4	5
d. I respect the cultural values and practices of others even when they are different from my own	1	2	3	4	5
e. I am open to having my beliefs and values challenged	1	2	3	4	5
f. I believe that human values differ significantly across cultures	1	2	3	4	5

g. I seek friendships with people from other cultural groups	1	2	3	4	5
h. I am comfortable interacting with people from foreign countries	1	2	3	4	5
i. I am knowledgeable about the culture of at least one country other than the US	1	2	3	4	5
j. I am knowledgeable about diversity and majority-minority relations in my host country	1	2	3	4	5
k. I am willing to take risks in pursuit of cross-cultural learning	1	2	3	4	5
l. I am non-judgmental when confronted with cultural differences	1	2	3	4	5

2. The second set of questions asks you to assess your intercultural skills, i.e. your ability to get along in other cultures and countries.

In the following scale, the number “1” means that you “strongly disagree” with the statement, while the number “5” means that you “strongly agree”. Circle one number for each statement that best represents where you are now on each dimension..

	strongly disagree			strongly agree	
a. I am comfortable being a “foreigner” in a country not my own	1	2	3	4	5
b. I am able to communicate with people from other cultures	1	2	3	4	5
c. I am comfortable speaking a foreign language	1	2	3	4	5
d. I am able to fit in and respect different customs and traditions	1	2	3	4	5
e. I am able to see the world from someone else’s perspective	1	2	3	4	5
f. I can communicate even when confronted with different viewpoints	1	2	3	4	5
g. I have the skills to live successfully in an international setting	1	2	3	4	5
h. I have the skills to travel independently in a foreign country	1	2	3	4	5
i. I am able to work cooperatively with people from other countries	1	2	3	4	5

3. The third set of questions asks you to assess your knowledge of global issues and processes.

In the following scale, the number “1” means that you “strongly disagree” with the statement, while the number “5” means that you “strongly agree”. Circle one number for each statement that best represents where you are now on each dimension.

	strongly disagree			strongly agree	
a. I have a strong interest in global affairs	1	2	3	4	5
b. I can explain the concept “globalization”	1	2	3	4	5

c. I know the difference between developed and developing nations	1	2	3	4	5
d. I understand the implications of economic globalization for both developed and developing nations	1	2	3	4	5
e. I can explain the concept “post-colonialism”	1	2	3	4	5
f. I am able to talk with confidence about current global issues	1	2	3	4	5
g. I can explain the causes of global poverty	1	2	3	4	5
h. I am knowledgeable about the economic impact of free trade on developing nations	1	2	3	4	5
i. I can give an example of how a cultural value and practice in the US developed in response to global economic conditions	1	2	3	4	5
j. I can give an example of how a cultural value and practice in my host country developed in response to global economic conditions	1	2	3	4	5
k. I can explain the interrelations between natural, political and economic systems	1	2	3	4	5
l. I have the ability to move easily among different cultures	1	2	3	4	5
m. I consider myself a global citizen	1	2	3	4	5

4. The next set of questions asks you to assess your ideas about the role of citizens in contemporary societies. In your role as a responsible citizen, how important are each of the following to you?

In the following scale, the number “1” means it is “not at all important to you” while the number “4” means that is it “essential to you”. Circle one number for each statement.

	Not at all important to you			essential to you
a. Working to end poverty	1	2	3	4
b. Using career-related skills to work in low-income communities	1	2	3	4
c. Promoting racial tolerance and respect	1	2	3	4
d. Creating awareness of how people affect the environment	1	2	3	4
e. Making consumer decisions based on a company’s ethics	1	2	3	4
f. Speaking up against social injustice	1	2	3	4
g. Volunteering with community groups and agencies	1	2	3	4
h. Working to promote religious understanding	1	2	3	4
i. Working to reduce economic disparities between countries	1	2	3	4
j. Working to promote tolerance and respect for other nations	1	2	3	4

k. Contributing money to international relief efforts	1	2	3	4
l. Becoming involved in activism related to global issues	1	2	3	4
m. Voting in local, state and national elections	1	2	3	4
n. Keeping fully informed about news and public issues	1	2	3	4
o. Maintaining an interest in current affairs	1	2	3	4
p. Working for social change	1	2	3	4
q. Participating in community service/volunteer work	1	2	3	4

5. The last set of questions are about your future plans. At this point in your life, how likely is it that you will participate in each of the following activities?

In the following scale, the number “1” means it is “not at all likely” while the number “5” means that it is “extremely likely”. Circle one number for each statement.

	not at all likely			extremely likely	
a. Attend graduate school	1	2	3	4	5
b. Participate in international service work as a volunteer	1	2	3	4	5
c. Attain and maintain fluency in a second language	1	2	3	4	5
d. Travel internationally on a regular basis	1	2	3	4	5
e. Join a volunteer organization like the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps.	1	2	3	4	5
f. Live or work in a foreign country after graduation	1	2	3	4	5
g. Contribute to organizations that support global health and justice	1	2	3	4	5
h. Seek friendships with people from other cultures	1	2	3	4	5
i. Choose to live in a culturally diverse neighborhood in the US	1	2	3	4	5
j. Participate in a short term volunteer activity like a mission trip or a Habitat for Humanity project.	1	2	3	4	5

THANK YOU for completing this questionnaire. If you have any questions or comments please write them in the space below.