

Preparing Psychology Students as Global Citizens and Leaders: Why Service Learning Matters

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The World Health Organization (2011) estimates that close to 450 million people suffer from mental illnesses across the globe. In fact, 5 of the 10 leading causes of disability worldwide are due to psychiatric conditions such as depression, psychosis, and substance use and abuse. It is predicted that by 2020, neuropsychiatric disorders will account for 15% of disability in the world. Yet, more than 80% of individuals who live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) do not have access to adequate mental health services (WHO, 2011). One of the contributing factors is a scarcity of providers with the training and skills necessary to meet the growing mental health needs of those affected by psychiatric illnesses locally and internationally (Saraceno et al., 2007).

Service learning programs offer a unique opportunity to educate and engage mental health students in meaningful, collaborative, and sustainable partnerships with international organizations in order to reduce mental health disparities in LMICs. The term service learning is defined as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Effective international service learning combines academic programs with experiential and community-based services that are intended to expand students’ global awareness, cultural sensitivity, and leadership and critical thinking skills (Crabtree, 2008).

There are several advantages to individuals who

participate in international service learning programs (ISLPs) and to the host communities. Through hands-on experiences, both students and faculty are exposed to cultures that may be different from their own. Such cross-cultural exchanges can compel them to confront their preconceived stereotypes, prejudices, and unconscious biases; challenge them to engage in self-reflections that promote greater awareness of the self and of connections to a larger global community; and facilitate the acquisition of cultural knowledge, understanding, sensitivity, tolerance and respect for the communities that they serve (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). Moreover, service learning can have a life altering (i.e., a *transformative reawakening*) effect on students, which may propel them toward active civic engagement and global citizenship (Crabtree, 2008). A global citizen in this context is an individual “who identifies with being a part of an emerging world community, and whose actions contribute to shaping its values and practices. [S/he] is someone who fights for justice because he or she has a vision of a better world” (AMP Global Youth, 2017).

ISLPs also create opportunities for host communities to develop personal, meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships with students and their academic institutions. Through sustainable partnerships with ISLPs, host communities can engage in knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer with faculty and program participants; gain access to human resources through jointly coordinated, volunteer-based projects; and enhance their organizational capacity to address the educational, vocational, economic,

and mental health needs of local residents.

While international service learning offers many benefits to both students and their host communities, there are some potential challenges. ISLPs can be taxing on a host community, requiring resources that may not be readily available, and may be disruptive to the normal routines of the host community. In some instances, there may be a lack of communication, coordination, and reciprocity between the partner organizations, which may have a negative impact on students' learning experiences and can threaten the viability of the relationship.

A critical challenge that academic institutions face is how to implement cross-cultural strategies that foster students' transformational learning experiences and move them beyond "a charity orientation" to viewing themselves as agents of social justice and social change (Crabtree, 2008, p. 26). Many students who seek ISLPs are often motivated by a genuine desire to *do good* and make a significant difference in the lives of the *less fortunate* (Illich, 2012). However, good intentions alone are not sufficient to address deeply-rooted concerns and create long-lasting systemic changes in international settings.

Effective service learning can only occur when there is a deliberate effort to replace deficit-based training models with pedagogical frameworks that impart a deep appreciation for the assets that exist within LMICs. Moreover, ISLPs must foster cross-cultural collaborations that are focused on community empowerment and capacity building (e.g., train-the-trainer models). They also need to utilize human resources within the host community in order to establish sustainable partnerships that are built on mutual respect, shared knowledge and understanding, and open communication.

Graduate institutions across the nation must take an active role in developing academic and international service learning programs for students in the fields of clinical psychology, counseling, organizational leadership, school psychology, and social work. One graduate training program that is committed to preparing the next generation of global citizens and leaders is the Center for Multicultural & Global Mental Health (CMGMH) at William James College. Through service learning and cultural immersion experiences in low- and middle-income countries, CMGMH students and

faculty actively engage with grassroots agencies, clinics, and community based organizations to facilitate psychoeducational workshops on integrating psychological services in primary care settings, design suicide prevention training for providers and community leaders, implement projects on positive youth engagement and leadership skills, develop socialemotional learning curricula for teachers and caregivers, create expressive arts programs for children and adolescents, design mental health literacy interventions to address the negative impact of stigma on help-seeking behaviors, and collaborate on other initiatives aimed at effecting positive change within the host community.

Each summer between 25 and 30 CMGMH students and faculty take part in ISLPs in four countries (i.e., Ecuador, Guyana, Haiti, and Kenya). These programs are designed to give participants an opportunity to work jointly with various hospitals, schools, and human services agencies that serve historically marginalized communities. One student reflected on the meaningful and transformative impacts of the service learning experience:

"The immersion trip has reinforced my passion for working with individuals who come from backgrounds different than mine. After completing my [field placement training] at a community mental health center..., I began to further understand the importance of serving individuals who come from [culturally diverse] backgrounds, particularly individuals who are immigrants and refugees. However, the immersion trip has solidified this importance as well as motivated me to want to further immerse myself in and understand other cultures. In addition, this trip has demonstrated to me the importance of learning beyond a textbook and beyond a classroom. The trip was truly a life-changing experience that I will never forget. I will forever hold in my heart the youth, educators, spirit, and lessons I learned during my [international immersion program]."

Another student remarked,

"[The program]... helped me reevaluate myself, my goals, my mission and my vision. I am convinced that knowledge of the world through immersion experiences will better prepare me for the leadership role that I aspire to hold in the future. It has helped me to develop greater sensitivity and respect for all cultural traditions and to think twice before making judgments about cultures that are different from my own."

International service learning programs are essential in addressing mental health disparities around the globe. When used effectively, ISLPs can serve as a powerful tool to educate, train and prepare a global generation of mental

Teaching International Psychology

health providers who possess the awareness, knowledge and skills to think and act globally. As Braskamp (2008) has stated, “True education, education really worthy of the name, is an organized effort to help people use their hearts, heads, and hands to contribute to the well-being of all of human society” (p. 3).

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