

# Chapter 11

## Service–Learning Abroad: Undergraduates’ Development of Pluralistic Outcomes

**Krista M. Soria**

*University of Minnesota, USA*

**Rebecca E. Hanson**

*University of Minnesota, USA*

**Shane M. Lueck**

*University of Minnesota, USA*

**Dale J. Morrow**

*University of Minnesota, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of a multi-institutional study of undergraduates who participated in service-learning abroad. Data were derived from the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey, which was administered to undergraduates enrolled at 14 large, public research-extensive universities ( $n = 12,744$ ) in the United States (US) during Spring 2013. The results of hierarchical linear regression analyses suggested that students who participated in service-learning abroad (11.79% of students) were significantly more likely to develop multicultural competence, global and intercultural skills, and leadership skills over their undergraduate peers who did not participate in service-learning abroad.*

### INTRODUCTION

College students in the United States (US) are increasingly participating in study abroad opportunities. For example, in the 2010-2011 academic year, 273,996 US students studied abroad, an increase of 1.3% from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2012). Participation in study abroad has more than tripled over the past two decades (Institute of International Education, 2012); concomitantly, research studying the effects of study abroad on college students’ developmental outcomes has increased. Scholars have demonstrated that college students who study abroad benefit from enhanced self-awareness and leadership skills (Dolby, 2007; Oppen, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990), develop a greater sense of independence (Hadis, 2005; Oppen et al., 1990) and become more self-confident (Cubillos &

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Ilvento, 2013; Oppen et al., 1990). Additionally, students who study abroad are more likely to develop global, intercultural, and international skills (Soria & Troisi, 2014; Stebleton, Soria, & Cherney, 2013).

Specific types of study abroad opportunities continue to be investigated for their connections to important developmental outcomes. For example, researchers have explored the benefits of college students' engagement in service-learning study abroad programs, programs in which students travel abroad and engage in a service-learning project, most commonly with a non-governmental organization or with a local community organization (Annette, 2002). Service-learning in international contexts can provide students with opportunities to interact with others from different social, political, cultural, and economic backgrounds. These interactions with citizens, in conjunction with experiential engagement and reflective learning activities, can help students to develop a sense of global citizenship (Annette, 2002). Participation in international service-learning programs can inspire students to critically reflect upon social problems, including social injustices around the globe, and develop an emergent global consciousness (Kiely, 2004).

Amid the benefits unveiled by researchers, however, international service-learning opportunities have only been explored in single-institutional contexts (Kiely, 2004; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005), in research using qualitative methods (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Parker & Dautoff, 2007; Wessel, 2007) or descriptive quantitative methods (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005), or within studies using small samples of undergraduates (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Parker & Dautoff, 2007; Roberts, Mason, & Marler, 1999; Wessel, 2007), thus limiting the potential generalizability of results across multiple institutional contexts. In general, scholars have continued to call for further research into the potential benefits of students' experiences in service-learning abroad to better understand how this particular high-impact educational practice can promote students' growth and development (Lowery et al., 2006; Nickols, Rothenberg, Moshi, & Tetloff, 2013; Williams & Nickols, 2011).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore undergraduates' participation in service-learning abroad from a multi-institutional vantage point. Utilizing a sample of undergraduates enrolled in 14 large, public research-extensive universities in 2013, the authors investigated the relationships between/among students' participation in service-learning abroad and their development of leadership skills, multicultural appreciation, and global and intercultural skills—outcomes that we believe are necessary to effect change in our pluralistic democracy. Above and beyond other forms of international experiences, we hypothesize that service-learning abroad stands to benefit students' growth and development of these pluralistic outcomes given the connections between academic content, real-world experiences, intercultural communication, and immersion in socio-political contexts that are often mutually present in service-learning abroad experiences. Given that service-learning abroad holds the potential to expose students to some of the problems and challenges experienced by others from different cultures and can connect these challenges to greater societal or global struggles, this particular high-impact practice may foster students' development in ways that are potentially more life-changing than other study abroad experiences.

In the present chapter, we conceptualize pluralistic outcomes from a few vantage points. We define leadership skills from the perspective of students' self-reported leadership and interpersonal social skills; a definition also derived from previous research studies on undergraduates' leadership development (Soria, Roberts, & Reinhard, 2015; Soria, Snyder, & Reinhard, 2015). We conceptualize students' development of multicultural competence as their self-reported development in self-awareness, understanding of personal social responsibility, and ability to appreciate and understand racial/ethnic and cultural diversity, a definition utilized in prior research (Soria, in press). Finally, we conceived of global and intercultural skills as students' self-reported development in their comfort and ability to work with people from other

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