Undergraduate Service Learning in Uganda:
Project Observations and Recommendations

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Introduction

International service learning programs have become more commonplace in higher education and in the workforce, serving as complementary to traditional classroom learning. Yet despite the growing trend, very little research has been conducted on the sustainability of international service learning projects in the communities that participants aim to help. In the following paper, I summarize the project design elements and relevant outcomes from eleven undergraduate-led community development projects in south central Uganda.

'Sustainability' of community development is an ambiguous and often debated term. This paper makes the assumption that a project, such as starting a women's group to discuss family planning, is sustainable if the structure (the group) or outcomes (better family planning knowledge) of that project remain for months or even years after the implementers have left. In other words, this paper discusses the sustainability outcomes of development projects, not the merits of the projects to begin with (i.e., Are women's groups beneficial development initiatives?). Further research should be done to determine the causation between projects and positive community outcomes in order to alleviate the need for such assumptions.

Literature review

Service learning programs have become an increasingly popular method of enhancing education through experiential learning. From web development programs for high school students to alternative break programs for college students, institutions and organizations have come to understand more and more of the benefits that service learning programs provide its participants (Preisder-Houy 2006, 3). Casile et al. (2011) showed that undergraduate students gained better mastery of course concepts through service learning than through traditional research projects, while Stewart et al. (2014) showed that domestic and international service learning programs may also promote moral development and cultural intelligence. Published research overwhelming supports the many benefits that students gain from service learning and the process of turning abstract classroom discussions into real life concepts and issues to be grappled with (Grusky, 2000; Pless and Borecka, 2013).

While a wealth of literature exists on the structural aspects of service learning programs and how it benefits participants -- such as the duration of the service program and the lessons that students take away -- little attention has been paid to the sustainability of these programs and its benefits for communities and organizations. As Grusky (2000) noted, "Much less analysis has been done on the impact on the collaborating communities, programs, and agencies" (860). This lack of research may be rooted in the creation of international service learning by combining traditional community service and study abroad (Bringle et al. 2010). In this way, the motivations of university faculty and student affairs staff may have prioritized student learning outcomes more than community outcomes, resulting in a plethora of student-focused educational workshops on topics like culture shock and homesickness (Culture Shock).

It has now become standard place for universities to have an Alternative Student Break or similar program that coordinates domestic and international service trips. Compared to the program's community participants, student in these programs can more easily take pre- and post-surveys to assess how the experience has impacted them. Some universities even have large Centers and Departments to support students and to create the most effective experiential learning (Eyler, 2010). With the best of intentions, however, these programs may not as easily be

able to assess the community impact that they have in order determine whether a week painting houses or building a water well is ultimately sustainable or beneficial[*].

In the course of researching for this paper, it quickly became apparent that authors and program directors often make the assumption that service is helpful to community members and partner organizations. Pless and Borecka (2013, 540), for example, suggested that organizations involved with one service learning program benefited from "process improvement, knowledge transfer and capacity-building" without studying or measuring the short- and long-term community impact. With further research and a change in the conversation, students engaging in service learning may do more good by focusing on project longevity and community impact than on personal outcomes.

Organization overview

Northwestern University founded the Global Engagement Studies Institute ("GESI") in 2007 as an international service learning program for undergraduate students to "advance community-driven change" (GESI Overview). GESI students spend eight to ten weeks interning for non-profit organizations in one of eight countries to address issues such as childhood development, economic empowerment, and global health. While interning, students work with their respective organizations to plan and implement a community development project that typically aligns with the mission of the organization. For example, GESI students interning for a savings cooperative in Bolivia might work with local community members to teach more sustainable farming techniques or create an afterschool entrepreneurship program for kids.

To facilitate the GESI program, Northwestern University partners with intermediary organizations that have international staff, such as the Foundation for Sustainable Development (FSD), to coordinate internships, homestays, and ensure student safety and security. FSD is GESI's primary partner organization, supporting and hosting well over 50% of GESI's students each year.

GESI and FSD both emphasize asset-based community development as a framework for working with communities (GESI History; Our Mission). ABCD promotes utilizing existing community resources to create bottom-up change, in contrast to top-down programs where outsiders often decide and complete a project that they believe the community needs (What is ABCD).

Method

To better understand the success of GESI development projects, I conducted qualitative research on GESI's oldest program site in Jinja, Uganda. I spent eight weeks in summer 2015 and ten days in March 2016 in Uganda conducting 37 qualitative interviews. During summer 2015, I researched eight GESI projects dating from 2009 until 2014 through interviews, site visits, and archival research. I also collected interviews with the GESI 2015 students and real-

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[*]Contrary to many service learning programs, the Northwestern University Buffett Institute and its GESI Program are actively working to address the lack of community impact research in international service learning. The Buffett Institute made the research for this paper possible by creating and financially supporting a Community-Based Research Fellowship as an initiative to equalize attention to both student learning and community outcomes.

time observations as they planned and implemented five community development projects. Eight months later, in March 2016, I returned to Uganda to follow up on three of the five summer 2015 projects.

Throughout my research, I sought to capture a 360-degree view of each of the selected projects. Rather than focusing on a specific research agenda, I asked a series of general questions to capture insights on how the project was selected, implemented, and, ultimately, why the interviewee felt certain elements were sustained. In order to create holistic case studies of development projects, I collected qualitative interviews from as many perspectives as possible, including the organization supervisors, community participants, FSD staff, and GESI students. I also took ethnographic notes from FSD team meetings, weekly status reports submitted by the students, organization site visits, and casual conversations with everyone involved. These ad-hoc observations helped to shape future interview questions about student and supervisor perceptions of the program. Whenever possible, interviews were done separately to ensure that one member of a group did not speak on behalf of the others.

The organization supervisor interviews were done in-person in Uganda, typically at a local coffee shop or at an individual's home. Fourteen of the 21 community participant interviews were conducted through an interpreter while walking with participants in the field.

I collected student perspectives two ways. For the eight past projects, I distributed an open-ended online survey via email and received responses from eleven of 31 former GESI students. For the 2015 projects, I conducted group exit interviews with all fifteen GESI students at the end of their program and more focused interviews with six of the students in April 2016.

Limitations

GESI students have designed and implemented more than 40 projects in Uganda since 2007, however, there was only enough time and resources to focus on eight past projects generally and three projects from 2015 more deeply. As a result, the below observations may not be indicative of the more than 200 GESI and FSD projects that have been implemented in almost a dozen countries over the last decade.

Additionally, there was a significant amount of qualitative data collected and not everything could be included. The process of categorizing observations and determining relevant program elements to discuss inherently introduced subjectivity. As with all research, these findings should not be considered as rules to follow, but rather as elements for consideration by future students engaging in international service learning.

Lastly, these observations should be viewed within the context of Ugandan community and culture. The outcome of project elements in one community may not be the same outcome experienced elsewhere in Uganda, Africa, or the world.

Observations

Notion of Outsiders

Community members initially had unrealistic expectations when three GESI students arrived in a new community in June 2015. Several project participants thought that the students were going to sponsor formal education for the young girls in the community since an NGO from Europe had done something similar the year before. As one community member said, "When we see [white people], we have a general expectation that they will bring money."[1]

Another summer 2015 group that worked with a saving cooperative faced a similar challenge. Three project participants later said that the community had gotten excited when they learned about the students coming because they "thought [the students] were bringing money."[2,3,4]

Another participant, after working with the students to create a communal nursery bed and learning how to grow new vegetables that would yield higher profits, remarked:

> We actually got something better than [cash] because the cash would have been used within a day. We learned how to work together to grow new things, and that will make all of us more money.[5]

Project Selection

The process of selecting a development project was the most common topic brought up by students, FSD staff, community members, and organization supervisors.

During GESI, students spend about the first week of their internship conducting informational interviews with community members. In line with FSD and the ABCD model, students are supposed to suggest a project that the community has expressed interest for during the interviews -- not what the students believe the community needs -- and then work with their supervisor to address feasibility and other organizational concerns. The final project proposal should be a 'win-win' for all parties involved, aligning the interests and skills of the students, the mission of the organization, and the self-reported needs of the community. However, when asked about the project ideas that their organization supervisor had suggested, a GESI 2015 student responded, "We just weren't interested in [those ideas]."[6] In reality, this model of community-driven project selection may not play out as intended.

Of the 36 GESI projects in Uganda since 2009, 32 of them have been new projects across 18 organizations. Seven organizations have hosted GESI students at least twice, and only two of these organization have had a GESI group follow up on a previous project. As one three-time GESI supervisor said, "Interns don't feel content to just add something on to a previous project; they want to start their own."[7] Two other organization supervisors also said they had observed a resistance from interns to continue or expand upon existing initiatives.[8,9]

This resistance is important to consider, especially when the longevity of a project may rely on an individual community member or staff person to champion the cause. A community participant that was part of a savings cooperative project in 2009 said that he felt pressured to champion the students' idea despite knowing that "some board members weren't interested."[10] Likewise, a 2014 project about goat rearing ended shortly after the GESI students left when the community members sold the goats from the project and bought pigs instead. When asked about this change, one participant told me, "We all wanted pigs in the first place but the [students] really wanted goats."[11]

Project Complexity

Organization supervisors are the ones most often tasked with supporting the development project after the GESI program. However, several supervisors complained of projects that attempted to address too many issues or that had several complicated elements that needed maintained. The supervisor of a 2015 hairdressing education project said that it was difficult for her to keep track of a membership fee that increased each week as opposed to a constant fee. Eventually, the participants stopped paying the increase and she stopped asking.[12]

Similarly, the supervisor of project about family planning and craft making said that it initially was too complicated for him to explain all of the project elements and to convince the women's group to meet without providing each of them meals or a stipend. Despite the complications, the group of women eventually developed friendships among each other and consistently met twice weekly for many months.[13]

Another example of a project complexity that has experienced mixed success is shared resources, such as a communal vegetable nursery bed. A 2015 agriculture project included a nursery bed for plants that was not used after the first harvest because it was too much effort for community members to transport hundreds of seedlings from the central location to their own homes.[14] On the reverse, another community created their own coffee nursery bed after the GESI students left in 2013 and have used it actively ever since.[15]

Project Finances

Each group of GESI students is allocated a small grant to help cover the startup costs of their community development projects. While funding might sometimes be necessary to get a project going, it might also increase financial dependency and impact future project sustainability. The GESI projects in Uganda faced two types of financial challenges more than any other difficulty.

The first challenge was project participation fees. Of the 36 projects researched, more than half of them required some type of membership fee from community participants. For the 2015 hairdressing education project, participants were required to pay a weekly fee to cover the teacher stipend and to replenish the grant money so that another cohort of community members could be taught how to dress hair in the future. The hairdressing teacher felt that it was important to require a fee because "When people contribute it makes them want to learn. They want to get what they're paying for."[16] The family planning and crafting project also required a similar membership fee to replenish the initial grant and create a reserve fund for future crafting workshops. In both cases, however, participants stopped paying soon after the GESI students had left and used the rest of the grant money to cover the project costs. As a result, the grant money was never replenished and additional community members were not able to participant in the program.

The second challenge that projects tended to face was what happened with any grant funds and supplies left behind by the GESI students. In many cases, the remaining grant and supplies were given to the host organization and earmarked for specific purposes, such as startup materials to expand the program or as a low-interest loan fund for project participants. Despite agreements between FSD, the GESI students, and the organization supervisors, remaining grant

funds and supplies were rarely used for the intended purposes. For the 2015 agriculture project, the GESI students created a low-interest loan fund that would be managed by the host organization. One month after the students left, almost 100% of the fund was given out as loans to about 85% of the project participants. In the six months that followed, only one of the 25 members who took out loans had begun to pay it back. Since the funds never belonged to the organization to begin with, the organization supervisor was not proactive in collecting loan payments.[17] Similarly, leftover vegetable seeds from an agriculture project in 2013 were intended for members of the group to expand their gardens at a later time but were used instead by the organization supervisor in her own garden.[18]

Projects that Foster Community

Seven of the eleven projects researched had a community group aspect, where students leveraged an existing network or helped to create a new gathering of community members. Of those seven groups, five still meet regularly. While certain aspects of a project might fail, my findings show that community groups are likely to weather these challenges. In the success cases, such as the 2015 women's group that learned about crafting and family planning, the craft teacher stopped providing lessons for free but the group of fifteen women still gathered to talk about daily challenges and share village gossip. Additionally, while a 2009 mushroom project began as a group initiative and is now done independently, community members still meet regularly to catch up with each other and problem solve any mushroom challenges that others might have.

The reason that two of the community groups no longer meet may be because the groups were formed for project outcome purposes rather than for personal relationships. For example, the 2015 hairdressing group dissolved after the 3-month program ended and all of the necessary skills were learned. Likewise, the 2014 goat rearing group originally met to divide profits and make a rearing schedule, but stopped meeting after the two shared goats were sold and an individual pig was bought for each person.

Project Ownership & Follow Up

After eight weeks of full-time work on a development project, GESI students are undoubtedly invested in the success they hope community members will achieve. Yet despite these hopes, GESI 2015 students had almost universally similar feelings about the future of their projects as they boarded a plane back to Northwestern:

I was optimistic but uncertain about how well the people understood.[19]

We were also a little nervous about how committed [our organization] was to the project. They sounded excited but logistically it was pretty complicated, so we weren't sure if they would take ownership of helping [the community members] when they needed support. [20]

I felt a little bit apprehensive and a bit guilty. I felt like I didn't want to look at the project too closely because I would see the cracks. We had seen a few challenges pop up last minute and basically we were just putting band aids on the issues.[21]

According to ABCD principles and FSD's model, community members are responsible for the long-term sustainability of development projects.[22] Despite students taking great care to convey this process and instill community ownership over the projects, challenges frequently arose as soon as students departed for home.

The GESI students for the 2015 hairdressing project suggested at the end of the internship that their project was sustainable because it was "mainly community driven" and they "relied heavily on [community] human resources" (Salis et al. 2015). However, the project ended in its entirety when the participants stopped paying the participation fee and the organization supervisor decided to use the remaining grant to fund the rest of the classes. For this project, at least, the organization supervisor's definition of sustainable differed drastically from the students' original intentions.

Likewise, one supervisor from a 2013 project felt it wasn't her job to ensure the project's success after GESI students had left, saying: "Well, it's a project between FSD and the community. Let FSD be the one to support follow ups if they want more than just [status] reports."[23] It was overwhelming clear from interviews that supervisors wanted a project to be sustainable so that they would not have to spend time and resources on it down the road. If future support was needed, it appeared that at least some supervisors believed that it should fall on the shoulders of FSD or GESI. This mindset was more often expressed by supervisors from smaller, more resource-constrained organizations than by supervisors from more established organizations with larger staff.

Implications

International community development is a highly contextual and risky undertaking. Each community and each issue may require a different approach to address community challenges. Perhaps one of the biggest detriments to positive change is that sustainable projects are necessary for large-scale change, and yet many projects never make it beyond the first few weeks or months. While university students on international service learning trips are undoubtedly interested in experiencing a new culture and gaining new skills, they should also be cognizant to ensure that their time as a guest in another community is mutually beneficial. Projects that fail to gain traction are par for the course in development, but students and community members can take proactive steps to co-design projects that will have the highest chance for sustainable success.

Project Design Recommendations

Keep it Simple

Simple projects may be more sustainable because they are manageable for an organization supervisor to support and for a community group to maintain. For example, the 2015 hairdressing project included hairdressing classes, leadership training, financial skills training, a group for discussing women's issues, stipends to a teacher and a program coordinator, and an increasing weekly membership fee. The students created a memorandum of understanding with all parties involved, but eight months later only a few of the participants remembered that leadership and finance training were even part of the program.

Benefit the Community and the Individual

When designing a project, consider that the community group or collective action aspect may fail, and ensure that each person can still benefit from the project as an individual. One three-time GESI supervisor advised: "If a farmer does something in their home, like rearing a goat or farming mushrooms … [as part of] a group effort, the project [will become] an individual project as soon as the students leave."[24] An example of this might be finding several people to teach a group of community members a skill that they can use individually in the future. This will limit the risk of relying on a specific individual or on an entirely communal resource.

Follow Their Passion (Not Yours)

Students should prioritize the interests of the community and the organization above their own when deciding on a project. Without organizational buy-in for a project, a supervisor may be less willing to support the development initiatives after GESI students have left. One supervisor shared how she had let a project fall apart after the students had left because she had never supported the idea in the first place. Rather, she approved the project in the beginning because the students seemed excited by the idea and she didn't want to disappoint them.[25]

Encourage an "Open Field" Policy

While the structure of a project may fade over time, as community members stop meeting or group leaders move away, the knowledge and skills developed during that time should continue to impact new people. From the very beginning, students should encourage community members to teach what they've learned through the project to anyone in the community who is interested. A GESI group in 2013 called this concept their "open papaya field" policy, and within three years after the project, participants estimated that they had taught at least ten people in the community how to grow papayas by letting them tour their fields.[26]

Resist the Need for New Money

Students should consider designing a project that does not require new money to be sustained. In other words, projects that require a membership fee or another funding source from the community may be more likely to face sustainability challenges than projects that promote individual business or increased community connection. The 2015 hairdressing project and the 2015 crafting project both relied on membership fees in order to make the educational aspect sustainable, and neither lasted for more than three months. One might also consider that while a membership fee increases an individual's desire to learn, it decreases the likelihood of an "open field" policy and the chance that participants will spread their knowledge to others down the road.

Conclusion

International service learning is a growing trend in higher education that has the potential to create sustainable change in the world. While more research needs to be done to assess the actual impact that programs like GESI and its projects make, a positive initial step is to shift the

conversation away from student benefits and more toward community outcomes. Part of this conversation includes being cognizant to design programs that leave a lasting impact on participants and the community.

This paper highlighted aspects of project design and real-world outcomes of eleven undergraduate-led projects in Uganda. It is my hope that it will serve as a starting point for students who are about to engage in international service learning. Students tend to want to start their own initiative as opposed to following up on existing programs, and, sometimes, egos and personal interest may mean that projects align more with the goals of the student than of the organization or the community. By understanding tendencies like these, students will be more likely to recognize them while in-country and adjust their actions accordingly.

Acknowledgments

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[3] Haawe (2015 community participant), interview by author, March 2016, Jinja, Uganda.

[4] Cissy (2015 community participant), interview by author, March 2016, Jinja, Uganda.

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