

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Global-Service Learning and Student-Athletes: A Model for Enhanced Academic Inclusion at the University of Washington



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## Abstract

**BACKGROUND** The University of Washington (UW) continues to create opportunities to engage all students in transformational undergraduate educational opportunities, such as study abroad.

**OBJECTIVE** This article describes specific efforts to increase inclusion for student-athletes in study abroad, particularly for first-generation students, including low-income students of color. Given the overrepresentation of students of color in sports vis-à-vis the larger student body at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), like UW, service-learning in communities beyond campus boundaries provides opportunities to apply international learning to a local context and to create a continuum of learning.

**METHODS** By coupling educational theories from the classroom—particularly theories related to power and privilege—with community-based leadership in local communities, students are better prepared to actively engage in improving their own institutions. During the summers of 2013, 2014, and 2015, the author was the instructor for study abroad courses to French Polynesia with student-athletes. The courses were for 12 days (10 days on the ground and 2 days of flying), the maximum time that football players could be away from required summer workouts. This paper examines student evaluations from the French Polynesia trip in 2015.

**FINDINGS** Student-athlete evaluations of a study abroad experience underscored: the transformative impact of study abroad to their academic, social, and athletic lives; the benefit of creating family-like relationships outside the confines of their sport; an appreciation for the many forms where indigenous knowledge resides, such as in navigation, dance, fishing, weaving, and cooking; intense feelings of culture shock upon return to the US, even when the trip is short in duration; a desire to engage with the diverse communities in Seattle beyond the scope of the program's structure, and; frustration, particularly for the male student-athletes, about the ways coaches, family, and friends wanted to frame the study abroad experience as a tourist experience in the South Pacific. In this regard, the student-athletes encountered stereotypes from their own communities that framed Oceania as a place for tourism, and student-athletes as uninterested in deep engagement with research and theory—stereotypes that the student-athletes resist.

**CONCLUSIONS** This paper explains how the findings, coupled with Hartman and Kiely's theories for global service learning (GSL), lead to recommendations for strengthening the future connections between global and local learning for students.

**KEY WORDS** student-athletes, predominantly white institutions (PWI), oceania, indigenous epistemologies, stereotypes

The class was not restricted to student-athletes, but the short timeline coupled with the expense of overseas travel meant that non-student-athletes opted for programs with a longer duration.

## INTRODUCTION

**Why Student-Athletes?.** The author, together with Ink Aleaga and Liberty Bracken, colleagues in UW's Student-Athlete Academic Services (SAAS), developed the study abroad program to French Polynesia prior to the publication of Hartman and Kiely's model<sup>1</sup> for global service learning. In French Polynesia, students were enrolled in an anthropology course taught by the author to understand the ways power, privilege, and colonialism combine differently for indigenous and nonindigenous communities in a country that is currently colonized by France.

The author's motivation for approaching SAAS staff about creating a study abroad to French Polynesia emerged from conversations with 3 Polynesian football players who excelled in the classroom and at research. These 3 students lamented the fact that their football schedule prevented them from participating in study abroad programs, as they voraciously consumed coursework at UW related to indigenous knowledge, language, and culture in Oceania but never had opportunities to participate in study abroad, which would support travel outside the United States and/or to their ancestral region.

As staff members in SAAS, Ink and Liberty worked with football and other coaches to identify windows for travel and to identify a possible time frame for the trip. Since the program began as an opportunity to explore opportunities for outstanding Polynesian students to deepen their education through fieldwork and study abroad in Oceania, Ink and Liberty initiated discussions with the football team. At the time of the first French Polynesia program, Pacific Islander students constituted approximately 0.7% of UW's entire student body but were overrepresented on football as nearly 20% of the team. For faculty interested in improving educational opportunities, including graduate school preparation, for Pacific Islanders, there is no avoiding athletics.

Men of color who are both underrepresented in research and graduate school as well as overrepresented in revenue-generating athletic activities for PWIs deserve greater support to ensure that they have opportunities to optimize their educational benefits. Scholarships, after all, constitute a university's side of its exchange with student-athletes who

contribute significant economic and other benefits to the university through athletic labor. Since many student-athletes in contact sports suffer injuries and most do not have an opportunity to play professionally, it is even more important to ensure that their education is not simply about earning a degree but preparing student-athletes to engage in the economy, to be productive contributors to their own communities after graduation, and to maximize social mobility opportunities for the students and their families.

Timing was crucial to the establishment of UW's study abroad programs with student-athletes. Some of the factors influencing the timing of the French Polynesia trip included: final exam schedules and the start of summer football workouts, availability of community liaisons at the host site, as people engage in other economic activities beyond hosting students (eg, people who are employed as teachers or in tourist-related activities in addition to our program), scheduling of medical care and/or surgeries for sports-related injuries, parenting responsibilities of university people during nonacademic parts of the year, and the availability and costs of international flights.

Study abroad programs have exponentially more moving parts than classroom-based learning and therefore are challenging to replicate from year to year. Even study abroad programs to the same location in subsequent years depend on the schedules of the collective of student participants. Universities also need to ensure that they take steps to reduce burdens on host communities; even when learning is reciprocal and desired by host communities, engagement with a group of college students is exhausting and disruptive to community life.

Study abroad coursework that includes service learning can also give student-athletes leadership experience in locations that better resemble their home communities than PWI campuses. If a college education is intended to prepare students for employment and leadership, it is important that students have firsthand experience translating their coursework into daily practice. For the student-athletes in revenue-generating sports who are the target for UW study abroad opportunities, many of the students come from low-income neighborhoods.

Because students receive academic credit for study abroad, student-athletes' scholarships usually pay for the cost of the international learning. Many student-athletes have never had international travel and learning opportunities, and even sports

(eg, basketball and volleyball) that sometimes compete overseas rarely have an immersive or intercultural experience because the team trips center on competition.

An additional benefit to study abroad is the opportunity for instructors to leave campus with their students (ie, an immersion experience). Instructors get to know students beyond the classroom and, as a result, can better support the learning of the students after they return to campus. Students who may feel out of place at PWIs, especially first-generation students, often do not understand how a degree in a field such as anthropology will be of value to their families or their communities; study abroad allows instructors to demonstrate firsthand the utility of their university education.

The academic interests of the Polynesian student-athletes (as well as other foreign-born or first-generation student-athletes) aligned with UW's interest in engaging all undergraduates in research and in developing study abroad programs that increase participation for underrepresented student groups. According to World Bank research: (m)any minority students do not have international travel experience prior to college, and going abroad can have a profound impact on further study and career choice. Yet those who stand to benefit most are often constrained from participation in overseas study due to curricular, financial, and informational barriers.

Minority students comprise only 20% of US students who study abroad, even though they make up more than a third of students in US higher education. In 2009 and 2010, of the total US students participating in study abroad programs for credit, 5% of students were black, 6% were Hispanic, 8% were Asian, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander, and 2% were multiracial.<sup>2</sup>

In Division-1 (D-1) schools with large athletic programs, like UW, the low participation rates of minority students in study abroad is even more troubling given the previously mentioned overrepresentation of students of color in sports, including revenue-generating sports, such as football and men's basketball. Revenue-generating sports often fund large portions of schools' Title IX programs in athletics, including many sports that are expensive and often provide scholarships to white students, such as crew, gymnastics, baseball, and softball.<sup>3</sup>

This leaves universities in the uncomfortable but essential role of acknowledging the ways that the physical labor of men of color largely supports

PWIs and the sports that historically serve white athletes.<sup>3,4</sup> Giving men of color in D-1 athletics the best possible education is an important dimension of inclusion efforts on university campuses and connects well to Hartman and Kiely's<sup>1</sup> ideas about acknowledging power, privilege, and hegemonic structures in all our institutions.

## METHODS

**Hartman and Kiely's GSL Framework and UW Programs.** Hartman and Keily's<sup>1</sup> GSL model contains 5 important tenets: a commitment to intercultural competence development; a focus on the structural elements of power, privilege, and hegemonic assumptions; awareness of context and the global marketization of volunteerism; immersive learning; and exploring the interconnectivity between global and local citizenship.

A program can strive to implement all 5 characteristics of GSL, but given the complex schedules of specialized groups, such as student-athletes, it is not always feasible. What is important, however, is for instructors and support staff to consider lessons learned from each study abroad trip, and to make improvements to subsequent programs, ideally to include as many elements as possible of Hartman and Keily's<sup>1</sup> ethical and pedagogical guidepost to international learning. Instructors need to devote the same energy to reflection as they require of their students, since it can provide insights to instructors and staff about opportunities to improve student outcomes and to reduce institutions' burdens on host communities.

After analyzing student evaluations from the French Polynesia trip in 2015, it became clear to the instructor that UW's program excelled at immersion, intercultural competence development, and shifting student paradigms toward global, rather than domestic, citizenry. When applying Hartman and Keily's<sup>1</sup> framework to the trip, it was clear that the study abroad course design did not provide ample opportunity for students to link their understandings about power and privilege in a colonial context to their own institutions.

## RESULTS

**Student Evaluation From 2015 in French Polynesia.** The 2015 trip included 13 student-athletes from multiple sports: men's football and track, and women's basketball, volleyball, and

softball. Six of the student-athletes were women, and 7 were men. None of the students were foreign-born, but 5 of them were first-generation college students. Every student completed an evaluation.

Students in the course learned about Pacific Islander epistemologies, or ways of knowing, as well as ontologies, or ways of being. In the 400-level class focusing on indigenous knowledge in Oceania, UW student-athletes learned to appreciate and respect indigenous knowledge forms in Oceania that are rarely accessible in the written texts associated with Western learning and difficult to access in Seattle.

Students read about the ancient science of navigation using both the stars by night and the waves in the daytime. Students learned about the impacts of French colonialism on the Maohi, or indigenous people, of colonial French Polynesia in part by examining the impacts of French nuclear weapons testing on indigenous lands. Important dimensions of student learning included the ways that colonialism intersects with weaving, dancing, chanting, fishing, and other cultural activities that both sustain the people but also pass information along from one generation to the next.

Student learning incorporated Hartman and Kiely's<sup>1</sup> attention to the ways that power, privilege, and hegemonic structures intersect in French Polynesia, but as stated earlier, the course did not adequately prepare students to explore the connections between their understandings acquired abroad and Seattle's diverse communities where students engaged in service learning after their return.

The study abroad was located on the outer island of Huahine in the small village of Haapu. Haapu residents pride themselves on self-sufficiency both as a political statement in terms of challenging ideas about dependency on France, but also culturally, as community members maintain cultural practices, like dancing and group fishing, that require communal involvement. The program is immersive, as Hartman and Kiely<sup>1</sup> prescribe; there were no "classes" held while in Haapu, as the philosophy of the program is for students to learn by doing and to develop relationships with the people.

Drawing on Wilson's teachings,<sup>5</sup> students considered how indigenous knowledge sharing is based on respect, reciprocity, and relationality, values that better prepare students to explore Hartman and Kiely's<sup>1</sup> goal of intercultural competency. UW students build relationships with the village people by

sleeping on the floor of the school building at the heart of the community. Children and community members moved in and out of the building and cooked, ate, and spent time with the UW students at all hours of the day and into the night. UW students felt privileged to learn how to weave, dance, fish, cook, and play the ukulele.

In return, UW students did their best to reciprocate by holding basketball and volleyball clinics but most of all by building relationships with the village kids. UW student-athletes and the children from the village shared everything from hair braiding, elaborate handshakes, and many UW students served as diving platforms in the lagoon and makeshift English instructors. UW students knew that it was impossible to reciprocate the learning and kindness they received in Haapu. Their transformation into global citizens led the UW students to understand that they could best thank the people of Haapu through active engagement in their own communities after returning to the United States.

After only 10 days in Haapu, there was widespread crying and even sobbing by the students, staff, and community members during the departure ceremony. Despite the lack of a common language (our students did not have time to learn French or Tahitian, and there are not many English speakers in the French colony), students from Seattle and the Haapu village on Huahine created a new community. The Pacific Ocean connects, rather than separates, Washington State and French Polynesia. This was an idea the students examined as part of their coursework. A Pacific Islander scholar, Epele Hau'ofa, compares a Western perspective that views islands as small and isolated to an Oceanic ontology that does not see boundaries but rather connections between lands, ocean, and sky that unite all people who border Oceania.<sup>6</sup>

The relationships the program developed in Haapu gave the UW students a visceral understanding of Hau'ofa. Before students left Seattle, they appreciated Hau'ofa's writing from a theoretical and philosophical perspective; they had no idea Hau'ofa would comfort them upon their return to Seattle and remind the students that they will always remain connected to Haapu through the ocean. At some point during the program, everyone in the UW group began to refer to our collection of people as "family." Internally, we began to mirror the Polynesian proclivity for making everyone feel like family and began referring to our UW group,

as well as our UW and Haapu collective, as “our family.”

Given the deep emotion that UW students experienced when departing Haapu, service learning at the end of the trip provided an opportunity for the “family” to stay close while allowing student-athletes to return to their required team workouts during the remainder of the summer term. After our return from French Polynesia, the students began their service learning in Seattle with Taro Roots, a nonprofit organization supporting the athletic and academic growth of Pacific Islander and other underserved students.

The service learning was short, just 2 days, and was designed to give students an opportunity to connect their firsthand learning in French Polynesia to the local Polynesian community in Seattle. Upon reflection, the duration and interaction with the children was too short to contribute meaningfully to the students’ learning, but the opportunity to reconvene the family that formed during the overseas portion of the class was important, as it gave students an opportunity to stay connected and to discuss some of the culture shock they experienced after returning to the United States.

This was important for the trip directors to realize, as it became clear that future trips needed to incorporate more conversations about culture shock, such as the difficulty the students faced in communicating the importance of their new relationships and experiences to their family and friends. When the program directors originally developed the study abroad, it was not anticipated that travel of such a short duration would result in culture shock and deep sadness about the experience coming to an end.

**Synthesis of Student Evaluations.** At the end of the service learning, the final portion of the course, the author asked students to complete a written evaluation about their study abroad experiences. Because this is not a research scenario, student feedback is summarized below and there are no direct quotes to attribute to individual students. The reason for eliciting feedback from the students is not to yield generalizable findings about student-athletes in study abroad, or GSL, but to better understand the student perspective at UW and to continue to make improvements to future programs at UW. Additionally, the goal of the study abroad is to give student-athletes an immersive educational experience outside the domain of athletics, and it was not developed as a research opportunity.

Student evaluations demonstrate both the importance of the study abroad to the students’ learning and the relevance of Hartman and Kiely’s<sup>1</sup> ideas, even though their framework was not built into the program’s initial design. Four important themes emerged from the student evaluations. The themes discussed below do not convey frequency or strength of student opinions. The 4 themes included (1) expanding notions of family and a commitment to build local community, (2) the benefits of exposing students to indigenous epistemologies, (3) the persistent and degrading stereotypes that follow student-athletes, and (4) improvements to the athletic lives of students.

*Expanding Notions of Family and a Commitment to Build Local Community.* Students reported that the 10 days spent in French Polynesia were life changing, particularly in the depths of the relationships the students formed both with the people of Haapu and their appreciation for the emphasis that people place on human relationships rather than material objects. For the duration of the trip, students felt like they belonged to a family both in terms of the local people but also with student-athletes from other teams that they do not interact with in Seattle. They no longer saw a divide between “us” and “them” or between people residing on a Pacific island and the students residing in Seattle.

After feeling a sense of strong family and community during the trip, it was jarring for students to return to Seattle and a lifestyle where they do not have the same freedom of time. For student-athletes who are highly scheduled, it was liberating for them to live without cell phones, technology, and the constant demand to report to family, friends, coaches, and others. Students became very aware of what they were missing, in terms of time spent on developing relationships with other people, as a tradeoff for the highly regimented schedules of D-1 athletes.

The students hoped to recreate connections to the Polynesian kids through the Taro Roots service learning, but spending a few hours with kids over the course of a weekend in no way resembled the intimacy of living with a community for 10 days. Students were surprised by the way that their entire perception about what is important in life shifted in such a short amount of time.

*Benefits of Exposing Students to Indigenous Epistemologies.* One of the most important takeaways from the trip for the students was a deep respect for

other ways of knowing. Having grown up in the United States, all of the students were used to seeing the knowledge from books and teachers as the focus of learning. For many of the students, learning with their hands—and learning as part of a community—gave them a firsthand appreciation for how indigenous communities maintain and pass information to future generations. The students felt proud of their newly developed skills in weaving, dancing, and crab hunting and a strong interest in continuing to access indigenous ways of knowing back in Seattle, including in museum and community-based learning environments.

***Persistent and Degrading Stereotypes That Follow Student-Athletes.*** Students expressed enthusiasm for the hands-on learning that they experienced during the trip. They returned to Seattle feeling excited to share what they learned, and to continue to explore opportunities for community-based research and learning. Based on the feedback from students, it was very unsettling for the students to return to friends and even family members who only seemed able to view the experience as a vacation rather than a deep engagement with the Polynesian people and culture.

The students found themselves unable to convey adequately the ways that the experience changed and inspired them as both students and athletes. The male students reported that their friends and other people in their athletic programs who were not on the trip wanted to frame the experience as a vacation on white sand beaches. The female student-athletes, unlike their male counterparts, reported much better support from friends and people in their athletic programs.

***Improvements to the Athletic Lives of Student-Athletes.*** An unexpected idea to emerge from the students' evaluations of the experience was the ways the students felt the study abroad benefited their athletic lives as well as their educational and personal lives. Students gained an appreciation for the ways a commitment to community and family helped them become better teammates. The students also indicated that gaining respect for different ways of thinking gives them more patience and understanding for their teammates from different backgrounds. Many of the students discussed their increased motivation to excel in their sports and feeling that they gained both significant leadership skills as well as a deeper appreciation for the opportunities they have in their lives. Living and interacting with people on Haapu who did not share

a common language also forced the students to improve their communication skills—skills that students think will benefit their athletic lives.

## DISCUSSION

The author believes there are many important findings from the students' evaluations. Student-athletes who participated in the trip walked away with a broader definition of citizenry and family, and certainly obtained the intercultural competence and global citizenry that Hartman and Kiely<sup>1</sup> aspire to with GSL. Students also returned to Seattle feeling extremely grateful for the learning opportunity and highly motivated to channel their appreciation and growth from Haapu into local kids in Seattle.

Students also recognized the shortcomings of Western knowledge production and an overemphasis on classroom-based learning. For student-athletes who excel at participatory, visual, and kinesthetic learning, experiential education provides an optimal learning environment. In the future, this program needs to consider how it can bring back to Seattle an enthusiasm for different ways of learning with local communities. After returning from international travel, students have a deeper appreciation for the important types of knowledge that reside in communities, and additional attention is needed to create continued opportunities for students to learn from and with local communities.

The persistent stereotypes that male student-athletes experience is an important idea to emerge from the evaluations. It was distressing to hear that male student-athletes experienced less than full support from their communities, particularly given the students' simultaneous epiphanies about themselves in relation to the greater world. The study abroad worked with local counterparts in French Polynesia to take the students as far away from the tourist locations as possible, yet male student-athletes were frustrated that their communities did not consider the learning opportunities available in a country known mostly for the tourist destination of Tahiti.

Based on the students' feedback, the author believes the program needs to undertake more outreach work with the student-athletes' communities. For example, UW needs to be proactive in having continued conversations with coaches who have control over the playing time of student-athletes

to make sure athletic programs understand the educational value of study abroad as well as the positive impacts to teamwork and communication reported by student participants.

Proactive conversations are important to guard against notions that study abroad adversely impacts students' athletic development, as it will be exceedingly difficult to maintain study abroad if this perception takes root. Also, given the power differentials between coaches and players, it is not always possible for students to address for themselves any misunderstandings about study abroad experiences that could arise.

Because of the need to make study abroad programs more inclusive and to diversify the pool of students who can take advantage of these transformational learning opportunities, it is important to allow for a flexible adaptation of GSL to fit the context and participant needs of a program for targeted groups of students, such as student-athletes. Student-athletes have not traditionally taken part in study abroad because of their extremely challenging schedules and because of concern about time away from training. To adapt programs to the needs of student-athletes, it is impossible to insist on all elements of an ideal GSL program; the French Polynesia program excelled at immersion and global citizenry, but did not have adequate time or ability to build in opportunities to translate student learning into a local context.

Given GSL's focus on power, privilege, and hegemonic structures, GSL would benefit from enhanced attention to the ethics for programs that engage with indigenous communities. Hartman and Kiely's<sup>1</sup> guide of working toward intercultural or global understandings is not adequate when working with indigenous communities. It is critically important for students to understand the ontologies and epistemologies of indigenous communities and for programs to construct rigorous codes of ethics to ensure that historical patterns of exploitation, including educational takings of knowledge, do not continue.

Wilson's work<sup>5</sup> extorting the importance of creating strong relationships that are based on reciprocity and respect can serve as important foundational guides for student engagement with communities that are different from their own, whether overseas or domestically. In the quest to give students opportunities to radically alter the way they see the world, and their place in it, we

do not want to overlook the communities outside the walls of our universities; locally-based service learning can play a role in breaking down our own power and privilege.

## CONCLUSIONS

GSL makes many important theoretical and pedagogical contributions, but it is important that we begin by critiquing and improving our own institutions. For student-athletes, it is important for institutions to acknowledge the desire of student-athletes to access study abroad opportunities, particularly given the athletic labor that these students provide to universities. We need to focus our scrutiny of power, privilege, and hegemonic structures on our own practices that continue to erect barriers of full participation in the academic experience to student-athletes, particularly for the low-income men of color that represent a disproportionate number of revenue-generating D-1 sports.

Student-athletes need the support of instructors, staff, and administrators to guard against potential attacks on the academic voracity of student-athletes who participate in study abroad given the unequal power dynamic between coaches and students. As student evaluation indicates, study abroad programs can enhance rather than hinder the athletic experiences of the students.

Each of the 3 students who initially created the impetus for study abroad programs for student-athletes earned academic awards at UW and are currently playing in the National Football League—intelligences of athletics and academics are complementary rather than mutually exclusive and can only be better understood when our institutions open up access for student-athletes in all areas of academia.

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