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International Service Learning: An Overview

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International Service Learning: An Overview

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Introduction. Healthcare disciplines including nursing, public health, occupational therapy, and physical therapy (PT) now recognize global health participation and education as a necessary component of healthcare education.

Increasingly, students applying to and choosing which PT program to attend must now consider the design, purpose, benefits, and potential drawbacks of such a program in their education.

This report seeks to provide a basic overview of International Service Learning (ISL), its benefits, potential concerns, and a brief comparison of the University of Puget Sound's (UPS) pilot ISL program to the optimal model of an ISL in order to define possible areas of improvement.



Results. Pechak and Thompson recommend 7 components to create a program with positive outcomes (Table 1).¹

Benefits include increased confidence, improved communication skills, expanded world view, increased cultural competence, improved critical thinking, self-empowerment, independence, increased student self-assessment scores, increased experiential learning opportunities, and increased understanding and confidence in professional roles when ISL project includes cooperation with other professions.¹⁻⁶

Ethical considerations that should be taken into account include the power dynamic between the community and those rendering services, the quality of care being provided, sustainability at the community and individual levels, and community need.⁵



Components of Optimal ISL Program ¹	University of Puget Sound's ISL Design
1. Partner that understands the role of the PT	Hearts in Motion (HIM). Operates clinics that employ physical therapists to provide care to the local community in addition to partnering with volunteer groups.
2. Community Identified Needs	HIM works with local organizations and the local government to identify needs and priorities to complement the resources already available. HIM has a constant presence in the region, employing the local community and volunteer groups to meet community needs.
3 Explicit Service and learning objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate an ability to adapt evaluation techniques and plans to provide evidence-based physical therapy interventions in an austere environment. • Discuss healthcare delivery in different regions of the world • Discuss factors that contribute to healthcare disparities in the United States and in specific regions of the world. • Discuss the terms cultural sensitivity, cultural competence, and cultural responsiveness. • Demonstrate reflection on global physical therapy practice and the student as a physical therapy practitioner from a global perspective.
4. Reflection	Students kept a journal, responding to specific prompts to promote critical reflection on cultural themes, daily activities and experience as a whole.
5. Preparations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One hour of medical Spanish instruction including quick reference handout for later reference with phrases and words likely to be used in Physical Therapy treatment session. • Article readings and group discussion of content to address the topics of cultural sensitivity, cultural competence, and cultural responsiveness outlined in the course objectives.
6. Risk Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting with UPS director of international programs to outline: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Code of conduct and behavioral expectations -U.S. Embassy of Guatemala contact information -CDC information for travelers to Guatemala -Worldwide caution information through travel.state.gov -Telephone, laptop and PDA security -Tips for women travelers -How to register for the "Smart Traveler Enrollment Program". -EIIA International Travel Insurance Coverage provided by UPS. -Sexual assault response information for study abroad participants. -What to do in event of emergency. • Each member provided with "Traveler's Checklist for Guatemala Mission Trips with HIM" handout. Handout outlined packing list/suggestions, safety precautions, financial/monetary information, vaccination information, arrival plans, housing information, trip rules, emergency contact numbers, and travel insurance information. • Student physical therapists supervised by licensed physical therapists including UPS and HIM staff PT. Number of students was kept below 6 to insure adequate level of supervision and patient safety.
7. Service Learning Outcome Measure	None. Reisch et al. recommends use method outlined by Shinnamon et al.

Table 1. Seven components of an optimal international service learning (ISL) project and how the University of Puget Sound pilot ISL fulfilled each component.

Discussion. By forming a relationship with HIM, the UPS ISL was able to address the lack of sustainability common to many ISLs. It has been observed that well-designed programs grasp that the relationship between the program and those it serves must be symbiotic, not simply serving one or the other.^{1,5}

The UPS pilot ISL program met 6/7 components for optimal ISL outlined by Pechak and Thompson. Most notably absent was the use of an outcome measure to evaluate the service learning experience. This should be a tool utilized in future programs.

Recommended improvements to the program include incorporating instruction to local care providers in order to increase the community's self-efficacy, increased preparation in medical Spanish in the months leading up to the ISL program, and use of a outcome measure to evaluate program success.



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