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Beyond Travel: Regis' Service Oriented Field Experience (SOFE) Program¹

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Abstract

This is a program description of the Service Oriented Field Experience (SOFE), which is a unique blended experiential learning capstone course within the Master of Nonprofit Management (MNM) at Regis University. The SOFE course blends aspects of social justice and nonprofit leadership into an eight-week course that focuses on the mission driven nature of the social sector throughout the world. While appropriating theories of experiential learning, the course builds on Jesuit pedagogical principles of experience, reflection, and action, and it includes deliberate exposure of Nonprofit/Nongovernmental (NP/NGO) leaders into contexts other than their own as a model for leadership development and growth. Leaders learn from this process about the complexity of social and other needs and the innovative approaches for solving them. These global connections support possible long-term engagement with these issues beyond the travel experience.

Introduction

The Service Oriented Field Experience (SOFE) is a unique blended experiential learning capstone course within the Master of Nonprofit Management (MNM) at Regis University that focuses on the mission-driven nature of the social sector throughout the world. Each SOFE is individually designed by experienced faculty to target a specific location and explore an emerging social justice theme (e.g. poverty, community development, etc.). Additionally, the eight-week graduate course explores these social justice themes together with the role of nonprofits/nongovernmental organizations (NP/NGOs) and civil society leadership in a specific context. The goal is to expose students to national and global issues through direct experience in a particular context.

History

The SOFE course was started twelve years ago as an optional capstone class. In the last five years, about 48 percent of Regis MNM graduates completed the SOFE class as part of their capstone. Designed as a blended course with online and travel components, this course has taken students to experiential learning locations that include Belize, Guatemala, Mexico, Ireland, Peru, South Africa, Tanzania, Rwanda, and

Uganda. It has also taken students to various places in the United States including Alaska, Denver, Hawaii, and the Navajo Nation. Currently the class, which runs three times a year (spring, summer, and fall) is focused on Denver and the Navajo Nation for the national sites, and East Africa (Rwanda and Uganda) and Peru for the international sites. Each class is organized for one of the travel locations, with each of the international sites running every other year.



*Learning from the community:
Discussing a Farm Concern (www.farmconcern.org)
community development model in Musanze, Rwanda
Photo by Brett Stakelin, Regis University*

Student composition

The SOFE is an unusual program because it targets adult learners in an accelerated graduate

program. The MNM degree at Regis is an executive program with part-time students who hold full time jobs and sometimes family responsibilities. By the time students take the optional SOFE course, many would have completed most of their other courses online or by attending night classes at the northwest Denver campus. For the online group, which is spread both nationally and internationally, this is the first time they are physically in a learning environment with their colleagues in the program.

Objectives of the program

The SOFE is what is defined as short-term learning experiences or *intercultural service immersion programs* (ISIPs). ISIPs have the unique characteristic of exploring learning beyond the classroom. The strongest part of SOFE courses is the connection with experiential learning opportunities. SOFEs involve travel and a deliberate immersion process, which takes students out of their comfort zone. In this situation, students engage in observation, action, and interaction with different leaders and NP/NGO stakeholders. Planned reflection and learning activities seek to expose students to realities of the NP sector in the context and to explore issues specific to the location and context. Students learn by engaging in learning and discussing issues with local leaders, and by visiting work sites of various NP/NGOs for observation and direct service. They are challenged to attempt an application of some of the knowledge gathered through the program into a specific environment. This helps expand the student's perspective of the issues beyond the classroom. The goal is also for students to experience the reality of being an NP/NGO leader in a different context, and through reflection, aid in their learning new ideas of how to be better leaders in their context.

The course starts by clearly articulating to students that this is a capstone class with specific learning objectives. Students are exposed to the history and culture before travel to the course location. Through visits to NP/NGOs, students learn about the context, the realities of carrying out the work they do, their successes, and their challenges. The facilitators use a rubric to choose which NP/NGOs to visit based on the course objectives. Therefore, to study homelessness, the

facilitators would include a policy or a homeless intervention NP/NGO in the itinerary. The students would visit this NP/NGO when on site for observations, discussions with the leaders, and sometimes participation through the program (e.g., in one of the sites, students go through the process of new food stamp intake process as recipients). This is always followed by debriefs tying back to materials the students have read on the issues, as well as reflection on how to apply this in the students' home/work context. During and after travel, they are challenged to reflect on their own context and apply this experience to their needs.

Process

Course expectations include significant amounts of reading and assignments around specific course objectives. The course term is divided into three main interrelated phases: the pre-SOFE, during, and post-SOFE.

1. **Pre-SOFE:** There are two mandatory informational meetings in the term prior to the course. This is the time to introduce the course theme, go over logistics, and start developing group dynamics. At the beginning of the actual course term, students study the history, cultures, and other significant issues surrounding the SOFE site. They engage with colleagues in online discussions on these topics as well as fulfill several assignments for the first three weeks of the term before travelling to the site. This provides the historical and theoretical underpinnings for the course theme. So, for example, in the recent East Africa SOFE with visits to Uganda and Rwanda, the theme of the class was new ways of ensuring social and economic development. To support this, students studied the history of the region with specific focus on colonial and postcolonial developments. They also studied the Millennium Development Goals and explored reports from these two countries. Finally, they considered the role of NP/NGOs in the processes of development relative to government and business development.
2. **During:** During the field visits, which are typically about 10 to 14 days, the goal is to

visit and learn from NP/NGOs that fit the objectives of the class. The course works with strategic NP/NGOs to learn about a community, its needs, areas, and processes in place to address the needs, successes, and challenges. Students engage directly with the community through site visits and discussions with leaders and other community members on the reality of their work and context. Where possible, the class meets with local and national leaders of all the three sectors, business, government, and nonprofit, who help put into perspective what the class will be learning. Additionally, each student chooses a topic as well as a related NP/NGO and prepares a 30-minute discussion. This forms part of the morning routine during the travel days. The student offers his or her research, and the group engages in discussions around the issues in question and the NP/NGO work. There are also significant amounts of time dedicated to debriefings and discussions, especially after visits to NP/NGOs. Debriefings not only help clarify the learning process, they are also points of developing the program. The ongoing comments during both the debriefings and online discussions as well as the evaluations that students provide help in shaping the focus and the logistics of the next course. This progressive co-creation of the program has helped keep it fresh and relevant in developing values-based leaders for the sector.

Part of our process for the field visits is to connect with a local university and learn from each other. For example, in our visits to Peru, we work with faculty at the Universidad del Pacifico in Lima. We engage them in discussions about economic development and the role of the nonprofit sector in the country. During our day-long visit at the university, we also spend time in discussions with students from some of their parallel programs.

3. **Post-SOFE:** After the field visits, learning continues with the remaining part of the term spent in reflection and discussions online. There is a final paper in which students are encouraged to select an issue that the class covered (e.g. child mortality, homelessness, poverty, etc.) and develop a program around

it. This can be a strategic plan, a fundraising plan, or a general intervention program. These programs must of necessity connect with an NP/NGO that we visited. The goal is to share this project with the organization as a resource. There is also encouragement for long-term connection with an NP/NGO or issue of choice. This, although not graded or mandated, forms the overarching goal of not only exposing the leaders of the sector to such needs, but also to encourage action.

Theory behind the program

As described above, the SOFE course is intense both in its focus and accomplishments. This is because the program is built on the transformative Ignatian pedagogy that promotes learning through experience, reflection, and action. These three underlying perspectives inform the course objectives, the choices for the study sites, and the specific NP/NGOs for engagement. Ignatian pedagogy also determines the leaders and community members whom the class interacts with or invites to offer the context perspectives. These considerations are the basis for the three-phase course process described above. The course is rooted in solid experiential education best practices as a part of a student capstone experience that enables students to engage in ways that are personally relevant to them, thereby connecting the learning to the rest of their lives and enabling them to take what they have learned back home with them.

The course is also built on the theoretical foundations of experiential education, which is the applied learning pedagogy that serves as the basis for intercultural service immersion programs. Ash and Clayton state that experiential education is grounded in the conviction that learning is maximized when it is active, engaged, and collaborative.² Experiential education involves “carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection, crucial analysis, and synthesis,” which are “structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results.”³ Learning takes place as people test concepts and theories in their lived experience and as they develop new concepts and theories based upon their experiences.⁴ According to a 2009

national survey conducted by Campus Compact, a national coalition of more than 1,100 college and university presidents dedicated to promoting community service, civic engagement, and service-learning, approximately 67 percent of colleges and universities are organizing these types of experiences for their student bodies.⁵ Largely due to student demand and enthusiasm, student groups are venturing into marginalized communities, determined to take on issues of poverty, injustice, and underdevelopment. These ISIPs combine research and education with service that encourages students to learn from the textbook of their communities. In this way, intercultural service immersions bridge classroom learning with the opportunity to create practical responses to social issues.

Integrated into a well-developed program, ISIPs can fulfill their potential as a transformational experience for students, which may inform subsequent study and career choices. According to Grusky, ISIPs need thoughtful preparation, orientation, program development, and the encouragement of study, as well as critical analysis and reflection.⁶ These same elements are identified

throughout the research that has grown over the last decade on this type of programming. Prior research has also found that participation in intercultural service-learning increases students' intercultural competence, language skills, appreciation of cultural difference, tolerance for ambiguity, and experiential understanding of complex global problems related to their academic program.⁷ These programs serve as a journey for all stakeholders involved (students, facilitators, and community partners) from a "zone of comfort" to a zone where "reversals and inversions can be part of the growing process of students."⁸ Tonkin found that many students experience "reverse culture shock" upon returning from their service experience and that they typically undergo a significant transformation with considerable critical reflection on personal values, norms, behaviors, and beliefs.⁹ In short, these experiences can have profound impacts on the students who participate in them and the communities with which they partner.

ISIPs may be framed in several ways, including: as training opportunities for the student, as service-oriented visits that benefit the host, as foundations



Photo by Brett Stakelin, Regis University

for a career focused on the issues addressed by the program, or as a combination of these factors.¹⁰ Immersion in another culture, particularly in a service role, can broaden students' horizons and make them better adapted to play an active role in global citizenship.¹¹ Intercultural service immersion projects are based on an underlying premise that "experiential dissonance" combined with "critical reflection" and "deeper connections with community" through *service-learning* activities will lead to profound changes in students' worldview.¹² This is known as *perspective transformation*.¹³ Many facilitators of intercultural service immersions adequately prepare students for this benefit and the emerging global consciousness that students often develop through their participation in these types of programs is well-researched.¹⁴ However, the effect of these trips on the communities that they enter is much less documented. The big question that is currently left out of the discussion revolving around the value of immersion experiences is, "What else is happening besides the personal transformation of our students?"

In order for these programs to have a truly positive impact, they should focus on creating a more just society and that service-learning theory is the best pedagogy that will allow ISIPs to live up to this lofty goal. It is also necessary to enhance educators' abilities to connect service-learning more effectively to its transformative and social justice mission. This includes the mission of transforming social structures and institutions that perpetuate inequities, oppression, and unjust relations of power. Indeed, effective ISIPs may be the ones that focus on social justice as an explicit goal of an education that includes the opportunity to participate in intercultural service immersion programs. As Berry asserts:

"Through the experience of [intercultural service immersions], students go beyond simplistic notions of culture to encounter multidimensional levels of society and the human condition. When linked to intentional and coherent learning, the value of the experience becomes exponential... Students begin to hear the voices previously unheard, the many voices of the culture. They are forced to examine the complexities of social,

economic, political, and more issues and their causes".¹⁵

In other words, when students make the connection between these experiences and their personal and professional roles in society, they may develop a sense of being agents of change and a desire to become civically engaged. There are strategies that, when well utilized, can help students to turn their emerging global consciousness into meaningful action. In fact, in Eyer and Giles' often-cited book, *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning*, they describe the path to transformative learning as "well-integrated" service-learning programs that focus on social change, and emphasize quality community placements, reflection, community voice, and diversity.¹⁶ When effectively integrated, service-learning pedagogy creates a learning sphere for students that is more apt to lead to transformative societal outcomes.

Results

The SOFE course is called a service course primarily because the experience is geared first to serving our students' learning needs and those of the local leaders by sharing our knowledge and creating a community of leaders for the sector. All our students are leaders in their own right and serve NP/NGOs in the United States. By connecting with leaders in another context, the program helps in developing opportunities for possible engagement beyond the course. Indeed, many participants have kept contact with their counterparts, including initiating new collaborations with them. The course serves these needs, which are in every respect profound. The course also tries to bring out discussions on the need for a more just society. It explores the role of NP/NGOs in this process including serving humanitarian needs as a first step, but also exploring potential for reforming society and its structures. This follows the inspiration for social justice, which is part of the foundation of the master's program.

In the area of student growth, perspective transformation is perhaps the most well documented outcome of critical reflection on ISIPs. Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our

“presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting on these new understandings”.¹⁷ Rhoads found that students who underwent some perspective transformation began to develop a more critical and caring self, one that understands the structural nature of social problems, identifies with the poor, and intends to advocate on their behalf.¹⁸ Eyler and Giles made the connection between perspective transformation and student participation in service-learning.¹⁹ They described students who, through their participation in service-learning experiences, have cultivated the perspective transformation process and developed characteristics and skills that include: a new understanding of the “locus and solution to social problems as linked to existing social arrangements,” increased ability to “question current social and institutional arrangements,” an increased “commitment to social justice,” and an “intent to act in ways that change social policies and institutions to alleviate social problems.”²⁰ Kellog describes three areas of perspective transformation in students who participate in service-learning projects:

1. Moral perspective: “an enhanced sense of empathy and caring about neighborhoods... in which students would identify themselves and residents of these neighborhoods as members of the same community”;
2. Political transformation: learning “how the regulatory system works and how relative power differences between industry, local jurisdictions, and community-based groups affect policy,” including how to “access and use information” collaboratively; and
3. Intellectual transformation: gaining a “better understanding of the challenges faced by neighborhoods seeking to address problems and the challenges that can result from the structure of the regulatory system.”²¹

Keilly adds the following perspectives to the list of transformations:

1. Cultural transformation: rethinking the “dominant cultural and social values, norms, and rituals,” questioning “global hegemony,” and recognizing one’s privileged lifestyle;
2. Personal transformation: rethinking previous self-concepts of lifestyle, relationships, and career path; and
3. Spiritual transformation: a movement toward “deeper (un)conscious understanding of self, purpose, society, and greater good.”²²



*Time for group discussions, debrief, and reflection
Photo by Brett Stakelin, Regis University*

These different levels of transformation are attempted through the experience but also by ensuring a deliberate critical reflection process before, during, and after the immersion. Dewey defines critical reflection as “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends.”²³ According to Rogers, critical reflections lead to integration of the understanding gained into one’s experience in order to “enable better choices or action in the future as well as enhance one’s overall effectiveness.”²⁴ Guided reflection also helps avoid a common flaw in ISIPs that one might have the experience but miss the deeper meaning of the exposure. In the SOFE course, there is every attempt to help students connect their experience with specific social justice issues back in their context as a way to encourage transformation. Burgenthal and Torney describe the value of this approach to intercultural immersions:

“[Intercultural] education should further the appropriate intellectual and emotional development of the individual. It should develop a sense of social responsibility and of solidarity with less privileged groups and should lead to observance of the principles of equality in everyday conduct. It also should help to develop qualities, aptitudes and abilities that enable the individual to acquire a critical understanding of problems at the national and the international level; to understand and explain facts, opinions and ideas; to work in a group; to accept and participate in free discussion; to observe the elementary rules of procedure applicable to any discussion; and to base value-judgments and decisions on a rational analysis of relevant facts and factors.”²⁵

Additionally, the course provides emotional connection to national and global issues. This is the holistic education envisioned within an engaged Ignatian pedagogy that enables the learners to “grow and develop as fully human persons.”²⁶ It is meant to expose learners to, and help learners identify with, people in a context different from their own and to challenge their thinking on how to be in fellowship with others. The experience is also intended to cultivate compassion and identification, which are not common characteristics that most of our education espouses. Notice the goal is not to solve the needs or problems in the context, but to learn from the context. Therefore, a common phrase in the orientation process for the students is that the mission on the travel part of the class is “not to dig and fill holes.” Of course the reference is the common focus of western mission trips to different parts of the world, that of solving a problem (e.g., building a house, cleaning up a river, etc.). While there is nothing wrong with these programs, the SOFE participants focus is primarily that of engaged learners. They interact with the leaders in the context and learn from their experiences. The facilitator’s role is to make it clear that the students are there to learn from the locals, and maybe together, to explore ways to solve common problems, both in their context as well as back home.

Once students have a better understanding of the personal struggles and contexts that people face

each day, they are better able to consider the effects of their own actions with respect to their experiences, and they are able to challenge themselves to live in solidarity with others around the world. Van Engen emphasizes the need to see commonalities between people while also recognizing that this interaction may be uncomfortable and challenging, since it is not required by society in daily life.²⁷ This approach requires students to ask underlying questions like, “Whose voices are heard and whose are excluded?” By developing reciprocal relationships that are rooted in a strong sense of solidarity as described above, universities can move intercultural service immersion programs in the direction of a justice-based approach.

It is clear that intercultural service immersion programs can provide students with opportunities to learn and serve in communities and with marginalized populations in deliberate and tangible ways. When done right, they offer a range of learning experiences and opportunities to develop a variety of skills for delivering effective service in their careers. It has been shown that students who engage in intercultural service immersion experiences develop a sense of civic responsibility and attain cultural competence. The SOFE seeks the transformation of the students through experience and reflection. Many post-SOFE evaluations confirm that this is happening. A recent graduate and participant in a SOFE class summed up the impact this class had on many students. She wrote, “I was a participant on the East Africa SOFE in 2013 and the experience gave way to my current career. I am currently a program coordinator in a field of the nonprofit sector I love and feel deeply passionate about. Until the SOFE course I could not quite put into words what I wanted to do in the nonprofit sector. I knew I loved sports and the leadership skills they helped develop in people. As we began to study the United Nation Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) during our course I uncovered a branch of the United Nations dedicated to sports as a tool for social development. The experience and the opportunity to explore the MDGs in East Africa inspired me to pursue a career using sports as a tool for social development.”²⁸ HJE

Notes

¹ This paper also contains additional notes from a 2011 study of the SOFE program by Sharif N. Abdelhamid, "Utilizing Service-Learning Theory to Integrate a Social Justice Perspective into Intercultural Service Immersion Programs" (MA thesis, Regis University, 2011). Used with permission.

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