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1-2018

# Significance of Immersion Programs

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### eCommons Citation

Niebler, Mary, "Significance of Immersion Programs" (2018). *Proceedings: Global Voices on the University of Dayton Campus*. 18.  
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### III. Significance of Immersion Programs

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*Mary Niebler, Associate Director, Center for Social Concern*

I'm Mary Niebler, and I coordinate the Cross-Cultural Summer Immersions program at the Center for Social Concern in Campus Ministry here at UD. I have been in this position for the past 12 years and have been involved with our immersions for the past 17 years, in a variety of ways. Although our Cross-Cultural Immersions include domestic trips to a variety of places across the country, for the purpose of today, I will focus on our international experiences. Mainly, these currently include 8- and 10-day service/immersion/learning experiences in El Salvador, Ecuador, Tijuana, Mexico, and Belize over the Winter Intercession; and our 4- and 8-week summer programs in Guatemala, India, Zambia, and Cameroon. UD immersion programs have been around in one shape or another since the late 1980s under the direction of Brother Phil Aaron. I believe our first immersion was to Sierra Leone.

The mission of the Center for Social Concern is to unite students' faith with justice for action. When we speak of a student's faith, that can be anything from a devout following of a major religion to believing in the goodness of all people. We encourage students to have open discussions about faith, as our trips are rooted in a Catholic ethos. Through our international immersion programs, we hope to have students encounter, share, and grow their perspective of the world and its inhabitants. Some of these encounters occur through direct service; some through learning engagements with government officials, NGO directors, survivors of war, migrants, teachers, doctors, lawyers, families, peers, and many others. Each Immersion is unique, and each student may gain something different. But our hope is to have students return from an international experience with new commitments to promoting global solidarity and the human dignity of all peoples—starting back here with our campus community.

Our framework lies in Catholic Social Teaching, which outlines specific areas of focus in which the Church calls people to act for peace and justice in the world. The common themes of Catholic Social Teaching are: 1) Human Dignity, 2) Global Solidarity, 3) a Call to Participation, 4) the Rights and Responsibility of All, 5) an Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, 6) the Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers, and 7) the Care for All of Creation. UD has based much of its mission on these themes as we seek to educate our students for "Service, Justice, and Peace."

Through our international immersion experiences, students are exposed to and asked to apply this call to their learning abroad—and, possibly more important, upon their return to the U.S.

At this point in U.S. history, exposure to and encounters with the global human family seems profoundly important. As leaders seek to degrade and sometimes vilify those from certain parts of the world for their own personal gain, it is my opinion and experience that building relationships with others is the primary way to seek peace and social justice. Hopefully such education of our students will break down barriers that lead to stereotyping, oppressive practice, and laws promoting American exceptionalism.

So are we accomplishing our goals? I would say for the most part, yes. Students have returned from their international experiences with open minds and hearts, and have committed themselves to promoting change and raising awareness on our campus, in our local community, and in our broader national and global landscapes.

There are countless examples of where an immersion experience can take a student. Through thorough preparation, deliberate reflection while on the experience, and reentry follow-up upon return, a BreakOut or Immersion student is able to process what may seem like an overwhelming amount of information and new experiences into making connections to their major, their vocation, and their faith life. Those who stand out have created lasting impacts on our university as well as places around the world.

I think of Christine Vehar, who participated in the Immersion to India in 2000. By listening to people's stories and seeing a need, she was inspired to help create a program at UD for engineering majors to travel abroad and use their engineering skills to help promote appropriate and sustainable technologies for the betterment of communities. From her inspiration, we now have what has grown to become the ETHOS Center, serving communities around the world and providing life-changing international experiences for hundreds of students.

I remember Anne Gabonay, who went to Cameroon in 2002 and lived in the city of Kumba with a family for two weeks. There, she saw the need for a library and upon return home, she figured out a way to make it happen. The Anne Gabonay Library stands today in the City of Kumba.

I think of Tracy Kemme, who through a variety of immersion experiences at UD, including the Guatemala Immersion, “had several brief but powerful encounters with the pain and injustice of our world (and) had much more to learn. That led me to apply to postgraduate volunteer

opportunities.” She spent two years as a volunteer in Ecuador with a program called Rosto de Cristo, and eventually was led to become a vowed Sister of Charity, dedicating her life to the work of peace and justice.

I think of Patrick Strauss, who went on the Zambia Immersion in 2006 and continues to visit the small village of Lubwe through the Lubwe Fund, a nonprofit organization (based in the UK) helping to bring clean water to the rural areas of Lubwe.

More recently, I think of all the encounters and stories I hear and read from students returning from their travels—how they have been given a new perspective on the world and human relationships in it. Students, more so than not, share that “This program has encouraged them to respond to the call of the Gospel to make service a part of their life.”

More specifically, all students write a reflection paper on their Summer Immersion experience, in which much of their learning journey is revealed. Here is an excerpt from one of these papers, by Samantha Windsor, who attended the India Immersion in June and July of 2017:

But what do these lessons mean? It was one thing to learn about community, coexistence, and love halfway around the world, but if I cannot carry these experiences back to the U.S., I would venture to say my time abroad was spent in vain. What I found this summer within myself is a passion for diversity. I think before I left for India, I could appreciate diversity. I thought it was something fun and exciting, to get a variety of viewpoints and experiences all talking together in the same room. Upon my return to the U.S., I don't know that I see diversity as a fun bonus, but as an absolute necessity. We live in a vast and brilliant world, filled with more languages, foods, cultures, and people than we can even imagine. I, in fact, could spend my entire life traveling the world and never be able to experience all the wonder that it holds. I discovered that not only is there beauty in other cultures, but also important lessons that our brothers and sisters around the world must teach us. To miss out on these lessons is to miss out on a vital part of our own human experience.

Something that resonated with me during one of our group reflection sessions was a quote from Mother Teresa that somebody shared: “We belong to each other.” As a future educator, I connect with that statement on different levels. I want to teach my students that the world belongs to them, but they also belong to the world. This responsibility is a two-way street. I want my students to know there is a whole world out there, filled with wonders and opportunities that they should imagine and then reach for. I want them to know that the world is theirs—and that they deserve every wonderful chance to learn and to grow. But I also need my students to understand that, in turn, they have a responsibility to the world. That responsibility means listening to and connecting with people who come from lives

vastly different than their own. That responsibility means building those connections into communities that work for justice, love, and peace. Sometimes, traveling halfway around the world is an important way to redeem and fulfill those responsibilities, but I also want my students to know that love exists right in their own backyard. The world is as vast or as limited as we make it to be.

Reflections like Sam's indicate the sense of solidarity gained by the students is very real, as well as their desire to strive for more solidarity in our world. Furthermore, we can see that the first-hand encounter provided by an immersion or abroad experience seems to be key in the learning.

### **Next Steps**

Next steps on the journey of the internationalization of the University of Dayton include: encouraging more students to have these experiences; and promoting the idea that, while cross-cultural encounters do not have to happen abroad, studying and serving outside the U.S. is a surefire way to step out of one's comfort zone and learn through exposure and experience.

Through collaborations across campus—with the CIP, academic departments, individual faculty, and many others—we have been able to enhance our BreakOut and Immersion experiences for our students. Some programs now include transfer credit, such as our language immersion in Guatemala; some provide full courses, such as the “History of Africa” course offered through the Cameroon Immersion; and others even have an entire class travel together, such as our Breakout to El Salvador, which, this year, is paired with the “Anthropology of Human Rights” course. Expanding these options for students, as well as continuing to seek ways to place these trips within financial reach for all students, are important continuing steps.