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The Heart Feels What the Eyes See

The Impact of Service-Immersion Programs

By John Savard, S.J.

It changed my life!" Many of us have heard students exclaim this as they return to campus from an international service-immersion experience to Central America, the Caribbean, or Africa. Yet they often have difficulty articulating exactly what has changed. I have been coordinating service-immersion programs for the past 15 years, so I focused my doctoral dissertation, from the School of Education at the University of San Francisco, toward research of the transformation that students report through the process of an international service-immersion program.

International service-immersion programs began at Jesuit colleges and universities as Vatican II made social justice a priority, calling on the faithful to help shoulder the heavy burden of poverty and hunger that afflicted much of the world. Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., echoed this focus as he challenged Jesuit alumni in 1973 to be "men for others," and to work toward dismantling oppressive social structures. While not all viewed this challenge favorably, the order ratified this direction in Decree Four of their 32nd General Congregation (1975) by stating, "The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement." It was with this background that immersion programs began and flourished at Jesuit colleges and universities. They were initially seen as alternatives to the traditional Spring Break in Fort Lauderdale or Cancun, but they are now prominent and highly publicized programs at Jesuit institutions, demonstrating the commitment to a faith that does justice.

My Research

My dissertation, *The Impact of Immersion Programs Upon Undergraduate Students of Jesuit Colleges and Universities* (2010), examined how students grew in becoming men and women with a "well-educated soli-

arity." This was a phrase Fr. Kolvenbach, S.J. coined at Santa Clara University in 2000. I found seven variables that described this *well-educated solidarity*: values, spirituality, compassion, social justice, cultural sensitivity, critical thinking, and sense of vocation. Thirteen campus ministries participated in my study, with 316 students completing my survey before departing for their trip, and once again, upon completion of the program. I took the difference between the before and after answers to indicate the amount of growth that students experienced due to their participation in the program.

"Why do people living in the U.S. and have so much feel so hopeless, and people who live there (Lima) and have nothing feel so grateful?"

Students felt strengthened to follow their own values, as they responded strongly to the item, "I don't care how others perceive me as long as I am doing something important with my life." After the immersion experience, they felt more confident in making decisions based on their own passions and desires, rather than based on what others expected of them. Participants often saw local communities making difficult choices and helping one another. One group of students traveled to Peru to work with a program delivering job training to street kids. The police tried to close down the

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Immersion experience Rockhurst University.

organization, but the organization did not give up on the kids. One student reflected, “Why do people living in the U.S., and have so much, feel so hopeless, and people who live there (Lima), and have nothing, feel so grateful?” As our Jesuit college students experienced the strength of communities coming together to take a stand in favor of these young street vendors, they examined their own values to clarify where they were passionately willing to take a stand.

Students expressed growth in their sense of compassion, with one participant stating that “the heart cannot feel what the eyes cannot see.” This student had visited a community in a poor area of Mexico that struggled to have drinking water. There was one pipe for the entire town and the families walked a long distance to carry water to their homes in buckets. The student noted, “Where I live, water is plentiful. I take it for granted, but life is not like that everywhere.” This student not only understood the problem of scarcity, but also felt what it was like to carry those buckets and feel the concern of the community over a potential shortage. This student explained, “I have to feel it first, then I can understand it.”

Students expressed growth in their sense of spirituality, as seen by the strong response to the item, “I consider issues of faith before making important decisions.” Students recognized their positions of privilege and the riches they enjoyed as Jesuit college students. They felt humbled when, being offered food and drink upon entering someone’s house, they realized it was all this family had. As one participant stated, “People here (in the U.S.) have everything they want, but are so empty. There, they

have nothing, but are spiritually rich. They possessed a richness that cannot be found in material things, but rather, a faith in something larger than themselves.

Students’ eyes were opened to issues of social justice, as when they experienced the struggle of immigrants in Mexico. They spoke with many individuals who had attempted to enter the U.S. numerous times and were sent back, and they could feel the desperation of these hopeful immigrants.

One student stated, “I’m from L.A., and this changed the way I view immigration.” Participants recognized how U.S. foreign policy affects the lives of others around the world. These students began to focus on structural changes that could have a positive impact on needy populations.

Implications

These programs are costly to run; yet, they give a high value of return in terms of mission-based objectives of Jesuit institutions. Upon graduation, students do not all go to work for non-profit corporations, but many do consider a year of post-college service with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps or Teach for America. Not all career paths change, but they often shift. One student who was interested in medicine began to think about working for a time with Doctors without Borders. Those interested in business began to learn about micro-loans. Another participant who was interested in education helped build a library at the school where the immersion took place.

Whether the students were attending Jesuit schools on the west or the east coast, at small colleges or large universities, they all expressed a similar impact from their participation in the immersion programs. This confirms that the crux of the immersion is the immersion itself, giving students an opportunity to experience the poverty and lack of resources that afflict much of the world. The power of the immersion is rooted in the intense experience of full absorption of the lives of the poor and marginalized. For this reason, the international service-immersion experience, sponsored by Jesuit colleges and universities, is an important step of a life-long journey toward solidarity. ■