

## Balancing Risk and Reward in Service Abroad

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE IS POPULAR AND ACCESSIBLE. One might—at first glance—imagine this is a good thing. Yet the risks are extreme, for individuals in the communities “served” and for those who engage in service.

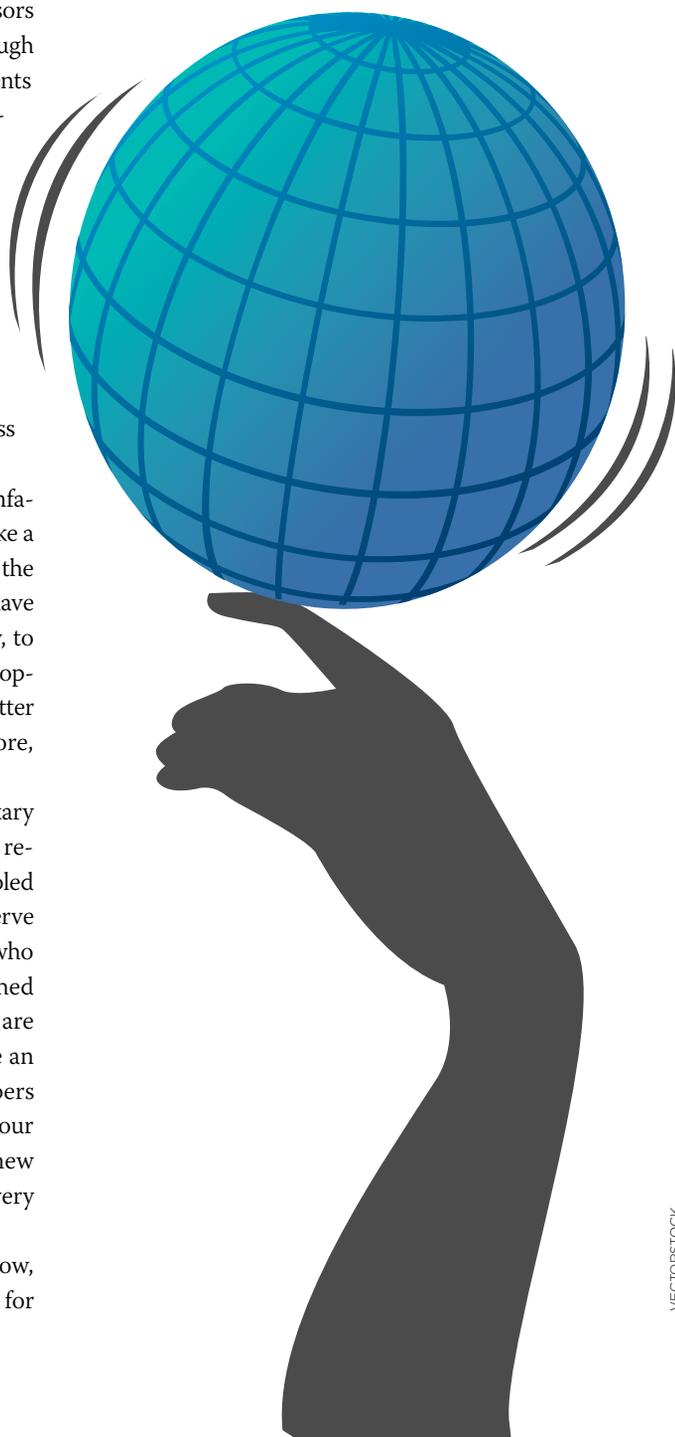
Service groups are often assembled by professors who are going beyond their position’s duties, through departments that don’t specialize in leading students in dialogue across cultures, and by offices with particularly small staffs. Or, increasingly idealistic students wish to go alone to strike out into the world to serve and make a positive difference. Unfortunately, these kinds of scenarios frequently lead to “community development” projects that aren’t desired by the community, negative intercultural experiences that solidify stereotypes, and ethnocentric withdrawal by individuals who once had a disposition to serve across cultures. It does not have to be this way.

To engage well in service across cultures, in unfamiliar communities (even domestically), is to strike a profoundly delicate balance. This does not mean the service should cease. It does mean that advisers have enhanced duties to prepare students and faculty, to help them think through all of their actions and opportunities, and to provide them with tips to better understand the broader structures at work before, during, and after service experiences.

Based on more than a decade of direct voluntary engagement, administrative coordination, and research on service and service learning, I’ve assembled this list of tips to share with those preparing to serve abroad. This tip list should be helpful for students who have had careful orientations, who have researched on their own, and even for those students who are vaguely aware that their program does not have an extensive preparation process. If faculty members play a large role in planning the orientation at your institution, or if faculty members are relatively new to international development, this will also be very helpful in your work with them.

While there are several clear suggestions below, they should all be considered as starting points for

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reflective inquiry. Each of the tips is part of preparing students to engage deeply in powerful, reflective intercultural learning and responsible community development. As your students and faculty members prepare to travel or as you prepare their final orientation meeting, remember to urge them to do the following.

**LEARN WHAT THEY CAN, THEN PREPARE TO LEARN MUCH MORE—AND MUCH DIFFERENTLY.** Suggest students prepare by researching the place and culture they'll visit. A concise history, the historical and cultural accounts offered by Lonely Planet, Let's Go, and Fodor's are all fine places to start. Ideally, they should read more than one book from more than one perspective. Most importantly, they must remember that books are merely representations. Encourage them to find resources specific to the precise community or region they'll be visiting. For many communities, the national representation will do very little to communicate the local reality.

Once they've learned what they can, they should understand it as a resource to draw upon, but assume they'll find contradictory information once they're on the ground. Urge them to recognize that local people have more immediate and more accurate experiences of their own communities than the writers who visited years ago. Advise your students to listen, learn, and adjust their understanding on the ground. Even if they will be working in a community with an extraordinarily rare language and even if English is spoken broadly as a second language, they should learn how to say "hello" and "thank you" in the local language. To learn from profound and critical accounts of public health and development, they should check out books like *Pathologies of Power* by Paul Farmer, or for longer reviews of the history and possibilities in international development efforts, recommend Michael Edwards' *Future Positive* or Paul Collier's *The Bottom Billion*. Urge them to examine what their theory of community development is. (For more on theories of development, see

Korten's *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*).

**BE TENTATIVE—IN CONCLUSIONS, IN ASSUMPTIONS, AND IN PROMISES.** Ask them to consider humility, fallibilism, and that millions of wrongs have been perpetrated in the name of Christianizing, civilizing, helping, and serving others around the world. Urge them, therefore, to hold on to their knowledge and understanding very tentatively. They will learn from books and Web sites, their understanding will later be contradicted by an extraordinarily well-informed and educated community leader, and then they will still later realize that person is simply one source in a sea of contradictions and the messy reality that is any community in the world. Remind them that they are slowly building an understanding, and that they necessarily only have small and narrow insights on a large and complex picture.

Tell them if they notice they are dichotomizing, they should stop and think again.

Advise them to be tentative in anything they say about returning to the community, fundraising for the community, or otherwise working on behalf of the community in the future. Unless they can absolutely guarantee their follow-through, they must be exceedingly careful with promises. For extremely challenging and difficult criticisms of international service efforts, they should look into Ivan Illich's *To Hell with Good Intentions* or blogger Holligurl's *Giving Back: The Volunteers Descend on Ghana*.

**LISTEN AND PROCEED COOPERATIVELY.**

If their service is organized by someone else, they should be sure that the organizers are part of or work cooperatively with the local community. Urge them to listen extremely carefully to local wishes, cautions, and insights. Make abundantly clear that they want as much direction from local individuals as those individuals are willing to offer. This is challenging, as visiting students often come with financial resources, and along with faculty members, they frequently bring some semblance of authority. Only through



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following several of the other suggestions here (be tentative, break bread, smile, reconsider service) will your students potentially be able to develop enough rapport and trust with local community members that they are willing to trust and share. Trust often takes years to build.

**BE BOLD—IN SMILES, IN GREETINGS, AND IN THANKING.** Urge students to smile and to say hello and thank you in the local language. These three things are profound resources. They build bridges. Advise them to politely ask whether they can cook with local people to learn about local foods. Of course remind them—again and again—to show appreciation for any opportunities they are given, no matter how small. They should say thank you again; smile again; say hello in the morning, in the evening, and in the middle of the day. Connect.

**THEY MUST BRACE THEMSELVES.** If your students are headed to a particularly marginalized developing country, disaster zone, or a community in the United States or Europe that has been the subject of systematic discrimination, they will see and experience things that are deeply unsettling and profoundly uncomfortable. It is absolutely right to be concerned and worried about

the hungry children, the pregnant mothers walking miles to the clinic, or the old man in pain with insufficient access to medical care. In fact, it is perfectly natural to be concerned about these things. That's why your students go. That's why they serve. They believe in equal human dignity and the importance of equal treatment. To help achieve some of the service they're there to provide, they'll have moments when they need to steel themselves against a torrent of emotion. They'll need to get through to the end of the day so they can consider, discuss, and cry later. They must be prepared to bite their lips.

**EMBRACE LIMITATIONS.** They want to change the world. And they may. But in the days or weeks that they'll be involved in direct service across cultures, they will not undo generations of discrimination and difference. They may be able to do more (see "Discuss the Future" below) later. The community—so long as their project has been planned well and through clear cooperation—will deeply appreciate their efforts now. But as they look around they will see one good effort in a sea of challenges. That's okay. As the great civil rights leader Myles Horton says, the road is made by walking. They must take one step at a time.

**Remind your students that we all have limitations, but if we can each make slight alterations to our lives, we can continue the ongoing effort to build a better world.**

**RECONSIDER "SERVICE."** In conflict-torn areas, some community leaders report that volunteers' presence simply "opens a dialogue space" regardless of the volunteers' purpose for being there. That is, through attempting to explain a conflict, local community members come to see their community and process toward peace in new ways. In some Native American, rural Jamaican, Appalachian, and urban African American communities, local leaders emphasize not only the direct literacy or numeracy tutoring support their youth are receiving, but also the fact that volunteers' presence opens their children's eyes to a bigger world and broader set of possibilities. In a Quichua community, high in the Andes Mountains in Ecuador, a local civic leader recently suggested that outsiders' genuinely interested questions about indigenous life, culture, and language supported a reemerging pride in Quichua life and culture after years of systematic discrimination and exclusion from Ecuadorian elites. That increase in community pride and understanding of the importance of local life and culture—in that community's members' eyes—was far more important than any temporary service visitors could provide.

If our wildest hopes, dreams, and prayers might be answered, we're all on a journey toward justice together. Students should be aware of and remember this possibility as they serve and visit with others around the world. Their service may be in listening, it may be in learning about another way of life, or it may be in building school classrooms. They must stay open to the varied ways they might be part of supporting justice and reconciliation. Their service may be—and indeed often is—far different than planned.

**TURN OUTWARD.** A great deal of international service occurs in the context of group



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trips. Students' group members will likely be incredible allies and could develop into lifelong friends, but advise your students to avoid the mistake of developing in-group identity at the expense of connecting with community members. It is important to reach out, to engage in conversations, to attempt to cook together, to play sports together, or to learn about local games, dance, or recreation. Suggest they forget about the Internet and the cell network.

Urge them to participate in local opportunities, even if they look like the momentary (or longer) fool. Advise them to show their interest in local culture, break bread, enjoy, and be present in the place. Always, of course, remind them to do this with clear and abiding respect for local customs and traditions. It is undeniably harder to communicate and connect with people outside one's cultural tradition than with those inside it. Remind your students of this while urging them to take the time to reach out and reap the profound rewards of learning and seeing from another's perspective.

**DISCUSS THE FUTURE.** If your students are visiting a place in profound need of service, if they do connect with local community members, and if they have the hearts that I suspect they do, they will want to do more. Doing more is hard—and it is where all the action is. Volunteers who return home to do more often educate family and friends, organize communities for fundraisers, and otherwise start to make large and small adjustments in their lives that recognize our global connections and common humanity.

If your students didn't have time to read the Farmer, Collier, or Edwards books referenced above *before* serving, they should absolutely take the time upon return. Reading those histories may help them see some of the broader political, social, and economic policy connections to the challenges faced in the communities where they served.

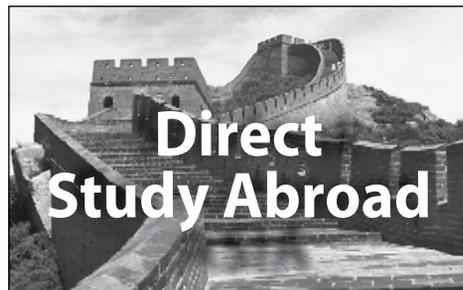
Changing the world is hard to do alone, but it can be done together. The team they traveled with is the most able to understand the commitments they develop. Urge your students to talk with team members and others about what they may do from home once they

return. Advise them to carefully share their experiences and passion with their friends and family. Prepare them for the very real possibility that their loved ones will have an extraordinarily difficult time understanding what they've seen and experienced. Remind your students that we all have limitations, but if we can each make slight alterations to our lives, we can continue the ongoing effort to build a better world. Urge them to enlist their friends, family, and service team in this effort. When a few people don't follow through, they should not despair. Remind them again, the road is made by walking. Everyone must walk in their own way.

**CELEBRATE OPPORTUNITIES.** Your students have the opportunity to visit a new place—a profound opportunity and joy in itself. They will also learn from and work with a community in an effort to build a better world. As long as this is done with clear community direction and in the context of ongoing efforts to build a more just, sustainable, and equitable world, they are now small ripples in a wave of hope and possibility. We must all—individually and together—commit to ideas and actions that build a better world. It's a beautiful thing. Your students are part of it. Urge them to celebrate that, and continue the good work.

As an international education adviser, the list above will help you maximize student and faculty learning experiences. Research in service-learning, education abroad, and intercultural sensitivity clearly demonstrates that better preparation and support engages deeper learning with more significant longitudinal effects. By directly urging your students to engage in these several important reflective areas of inquiry, you are beginning their facilitated learning early in their journeys. And by ensuring that they discuss the future and celebrate opportunities, you are also increasing the likelihood that their international experiences translate to a stronger culture of international engagement on campus and in the local community after programs are completed. **IE**

**ERIC HARTMAN, PhD**, serves on the board of directors of Amizade Global Service-Learning, where he was previously executive director.



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