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## Cross Cultural Volunteering: A Best Practices Guide for Aspiras USA

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Cross-Cultural Volunteering: A Best Practices Guide for Aspiras USA

Lindsey King

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Lee Honors College Undergraduate Thesis

### Abstract

This thesis project explores the topic of cross-cultural volunteering in the context of volunteer opportunities facilitated by Aspiras USA, a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization focused on youth and community development efforts in the Dominican Republic. Aspiras partners with various college student organizations in the US and offers them opportunities for international volunteering in the Dominican Republic. Knowing how popular international volunteering is, and that it can result in negative outcomes, I was interested in the experiences of these Aspiras volunteers and the community hosts, and how to improve said experiences. I completed a thorough review of literature surrounding volunteer tourism and youth and community development, and I conducted interviews with Aspiras volunteers and host communities that were involved in a volunteer trip. In the process of transcribing and analyzing interview data, common themes emerged such as positive experiences, personal growth, and areas for improvement. I found that cross-cultural volunteer experiences can be positive for both volunteers and hosts, but require comprehensive preparation and intentional facilitation efforts. This research concludes with best practices and recommendations for planning and facilitating volunteer trips.

## Introduction

Volunteer tourism, also known as voluntourism, is a massive industry that spans the world. A simple google search of the word “voluntourism” generates well over half a million results, with thousands of opportunities to travel and volunteer. Within the countless journal and newspaper articles, websites, books, and other media publications about volunteer tourism, are many critiques of the industry and the way certain volunteer programs are run (Freidus, 2017). Some see international volunteering as misplaced good intentions (Kushner, 2016). Others believe volunteering, many times, does more harm than good (Corbett & Fikkert, 2014). On the other side of the argument, there are documented positives. In some cases, volunteers help increase organizational capacity by providing extra hands to help with certain projects, or giving local staff a break (Sharraden, Lough & Bopp, 2013). They can also bring excitement to communities (see “Theme: volunteer positives . . .” in Findings and Discussion). Along with those examples, the cross cultural communication that happens on volunteer trips can increase understanding and appreciation for different cultures (Freidus, 2017). International volunteering has also been known to have profound impact on volunteers, changing worldviews and contributing to positive lifestyle transformation. (Kiely, 2004). My idea to research volunteering was sparked by my own history with volunteering, and, in part, my own misunderstandings. As a researcher, I have a close interest in this subject matter. Before discussing the specifics of my project, it is necessary for me to reflect on my position in relation to this study.

Directly following high school, I moved to a rural village in Zambia, Africa. There, I lived for two years and helped start a school backed by a United States based nonprofit organization that partnered with locals. I was seventeen years old, had no cross-cultural training,

and minimal volunteer experience before I moved to Zambia. I briefly studied the culture, read blogs written by missionaries in Africa, and practiced cooking what I thought was African food. My only image of Africa was what I had seen on Google, in promotional magazines from organizations like World Vision, or in commercials depicting sad images of poor African children. I had good intentions, but my views were ignorant. One particular thought I remember having was during my first week in Zambia.

I saw a young boy sitting just down the path from where I lived, playing with an old water bottle. I remember feeling bad for him, thinking that he didn't have real toys to play with. I also remember thinking that he looked sad, and I assumed negative things about his home life. Not only did I think those thoughts, but my pity for this boy was so strong that I wrote about it in my journal that day. In reality, this boy was probably having an average summer day, and I misunderstood his lack of interest in me as sadness. I am disappointed to say that that was not the only demeaning thought I had about my neighbors before I got to know them as individuals. But how could I have known better? My whole life, media told me the narrative that Africa is one big desert with a lot of poor, sad, helpless people. Thankfully, I learned a lot in my two years there. Upon returning to the U.S. two years later, though my knowledge was still very limited, I had a passion for educating others on what I had learned through my own "reality checks."

For the next four years back in the U.S., my job gave me the opportunity to lead high school summer mission trips (faith-based, week-long, summer volunteer experiences for high school students). These trips were to a mix of domestic and international locations and in both rural and urban low-income areas. During those four years, I kept reading, watching, and learning about the pros and cons of volunteering. That time continued to foster my passion for

teaching others about volunteering and what I knew to be best practices. It was near the end of those four years that I became aware of a secular nonprofit organization called Aspiras, doing youth development work through education and sports. I learned that Aspiras was a new nonprofit, based in the Dominican Republic, with partners in the United States. I also learned that they offered volunteer trips for college students to visit the Dominican Republic, but did not have any resources to train their volunteers. It was in that open space that my thesis research topic began to take shape.

I knew that international short-term volunteer trips often cause harm to communities, reinforce negative stereotypes, and hinder true development. The majority of people that volunteer internationally are white, and from a higher socioeconomic status than those in host communities (Guttentag, 2009). This dynamic often gives rise to the feelings and detrimental actions associated with an idea called the “savior complex,” where individuals from developed countries have a self-serving drive to save poor people (most often stated as “White Savior Complex.” Though, to me, that term is limiting because anyone, regardless of race, can have a savior complex.) (Guarino, 2018). I believed it was possible for college students to interact as agents of Aspiras in mutually beneficial ways with host communities, but I wanted to know how.

My research focused on participant and host experiences in cross-cultural exchanges during volunteer trips. Over all, I was interested in improving those experiences. The driving questions for this research were about existing literature on voluntourism pros and cons, volunteer perspectives, and host perspectives. I reviewed literature on relevant topics, and conducted interviews with Aspiras volunteers and individuals in host communities in the Dominican Republic. After reviewing literature and analyzing interview data, I sought to

develop an informed, research based list of best practices and recommendations. The goal of this project is to provide information that Aspiras can use to build their volunteer program in a way that ensures lasting positive outcomes for all involved.

### **Background of Aspiras**

Aspiras was founded by two Dominican international students and one American student at Western Michigan University. Aspiras began as a simple donation drive in hopes to collect soccer gear to send back to a beloved soccer club in the Dominican Republic in need of support. After receiving an overwhelming amount of donations, the small group of students began to dream the vision for what is now Aspiras USA. On their website, one will find information about Aspiras' mission, vision, values, and programming (Aspiras Foundation, 2019).

Aspiras USA is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization formed for the purpose of supporting soccer programs based in the Dominican Republic. It is a network of college student organizations, groups, and individuals. On YouTube, there are different videos highlighting what Aspiras does. One of these is an official news story from a news station in the Dominican Republic (Nuria Piera, 2018). Aspiras has a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn. There are three university chapters of Aspiras who also have social media presence. One chapter at Western Michigan University, one at Indiana University, and one at Columbia University in New York. These student groups raise funds, donations, and awareness for Aspiras, and have the opportunity for an annual volunteer trip to the DR. Along with supporting the Dominican Republic, they are encouraged to volunteer in their own communities. College groups have been known to volunteer at local after-school programs as well as serve meals at drop-in day shelters. The Western Herald, Western Michigan University's

student newspaper, has written two articles about Aspiras (Christensen, 2017, & Buffa, 2017), as well as published a video (Western Herald Video, 2017).

In the Dominican Republic, Aspiras supports approximately 18 different soccer clubs. They seek to provide opportunities to children in developing communities through “soccer, education, and social inclusion” (Aspiras Foundation, 2019). They help support local soccer clubs by providing donations of soccer gear, offering continuing education to coaches, helping organize community soccer tournaments, and giving talks on their core values. As seen on their website, Aspiras has five core values they believe people can learn from sports. These are: responsibility, leadership, discipline, teamwork, and perseverance. The aim of Aspiras is to uplift youth and their communities through these various elements of support. Though Aspiras is a fairly new organization, they are growing quickly, and already have widespread awareness.

### **Review of Literature**

My review of literature began scattered and slowly formed into two areas of focus. In a broad sense, these areas are: research surrounding youth and community development, and information about cross-cultural volunteering. When exploring literature about volunteering, to better organize and understand it, I separated information into two subcategories: impacts on volunteers and impacts on host communities. Within these two subcategories, I noticed three prominent and relevant themes: positives, negatives, and best practices.

### **Youth and Community Development**

The United Nations describes community development as, “A process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems.” (United Nations, 2010). This seems to describe a more recent and widely accepted form of



development. The following points of view come from research findings from an analysis of 217 studies conducted by universities in the Philippines about community development over a fifty year span. According to research, approaches began mostly in a top-down fashion (led by outsiders and institutions), then moved toward a more participatory type (with locals having a certain degree of input and action), and finally shifted into community-based projects (planned and led by locals, with some support from outsiders). These three development approaches don't always happen separate from one another; some projects have elements from them all. The approaches mentioned are also not exhaustive. There are other approaches to community development, like spiritual, or rights based. Some different methods of community development might include community education, organizing, or research. Development approaches, methods, and theories are complex and ever changing (Quimbo, Perez, & Tan, 2018). One thought shared in this study was that whether a community development effort will be successful or not does not depend on picking one right approach or method. On the other hand, it comes down to picking which approaches are relevant to any given community, and how different methods will compliment each other in the implementation process to bring about a desired result (Quimbo et al., 2018.) Considering Aspiras, they fall under the participatory and community-based approaches to community development. Additionally, Aspiras' values, and the programs they support, have many elements of effective youth development.

The National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition describes youth development as a “process that prepares a young person to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood and achieve his or her full potential.” (NASET, 2010). Some factors that promote healthy youth development in a community are, having youth programs available, adults who

model responsible and healthy behavior, and adults who advocate for youth. When youth programs are well done, they place importance on youth being a part of the leadership process. Examples of this include involving youth in considering needs, planning, and implementation of certain projects in communities. Other qualities of an effective youth program, according to NASET, are providing constructive activities for youth to be involved in, like learning art, and sports. Along with that, programs are effective when they place importance on values like friendship and learning. Research shows that the presence of a caring adult in a young person's life can promote resilience, and have great positive impact on their development (NASET, 2010). Youth, when empowered and working together, have power to make real change in their communities, in some cases affecting school programs and even usage of government funds (Christens & Dolan, 2011). Programs that promote healthy youth development are an important piece of supporting young people so that they grow into individuals ready and able to impact their communities.

The work Aspiras does is a blend of community development and youth development. Aspiras was founded by Dominicans, and the leadership continues to be majority Dominican. The soccer clubs they support are run by local community members. Aspiras builds supportive partnerships, provides education, materials, and at times extra capacity to soccer clubs in low income areas. Aspiras sees investing in youth as an investment in the entire community. On their website, they talk about uplifting youth and their communities, inspiring them to seek better futures. In order to provide Aspiras with a comprehensive list of best practices and recommendations, I thought it necessary to look into history and information surrounding their

type of work (youth and community development), and then explore how volunteers fit into that. After finding literature about development, I switched my focus to the area of volunteering.

### **Cross-cultural Volunteering**

Existing literature on the subject of volunteering is extensive. In my search, I found subjects such as volunteering, international volunteering, faith-based volunteering, volunteer tourism, community development, youth development, international service learning, and international study abroad experiences. I have to admit, I was surprised at how saturated the existing body of knowledge was. Though there is still room for knowledge to be added, I was able to find more scholarly information than I had originally anticipated. Just when I thought I knew something that a lot of society hadn't caught on to yet, I realized there are thousands of people just as (if not more) passionate and definitely more educated on this subject than I am, and they have already been researching it for decades. The old saying, "there is nothing new under the sun," has become a good friend of mine throughout my undergraduate years, and there it was taunting me again.

Humbled and eager to learn, I discovered a multitude of scholarly journal articles, online newspaper articles, blog posts, and book excerpts in the area of cross cultural volunteering and community development. Most of what I decided to focus on in my review of literature falls within two different categories. These categories are: the impact of international volunteering and service learning on the individual, and the impact of international volunteering and service learning on host communities. Current research is showing that philanthropy efforts can be mutually beneficial for both volunteers and host communities (Crabtree, 2008). I plan to explore exactly how those experiences can be mutually beneficial. I discovered substantial positives,

negatives, and best practices within each of these categories. Before delving into these, I thought it would be a good idea to give background context for what some of the terms mean that I will be using throughout the rest of this paper. International volunteering, volunteer tourism, and service learning are all slightly different concepts, but I noticed that in practice, based on the categories I observed, they all have similar impacts on both the individual and the host community.

*International volunteering* generally includes individuals, groups, or families participating in charity activities in a foreign, low income area that are run by a secular or faith-based nonprofit or a for-profit host organization. Activities are often part of ongoing efforts in a particular community, where volunteers get the chance to support an existing project (Projects Abroad, 2018). This might include volunteering at an orphanage or school to spend time with children, leading a faith based program in a rural village or an impoverished city, providing free medical services, or helping with wildlife conservation efforts. It could also include projects like painting, landscaping, or building.

*Volunteer tourism* is a travel trend where people seek out volunteer activities while they are on vacation/traveling, or go through an organization that schedules their vacation, but provides short term service opportunities as well. The idea is to go on vacation and experience a new place, but give back while you are there (Freidus, 2017). Examples might include going on a hiking trip in Africa and stopping to visit a rural school or health clinic, or going surfing in the Caribbean and spending one day helping nurse sick marine animals back to health.

*International service learning*, on the other hand, tends to be more structured. It is often organized by a school with a learning/educational focus for individuals, and might involve

partnerships with local organizations so students can be a part of a local outreach or development program. Service learning also has a focus placed on people verbally and orally reflecting on experiences, to better learn and retain information (Clark, 2017). Service learning might be an element added to study abroad opportunities, or something in a class where students are given credit for participating in volunteering. Examples of this could be nursing students working with locals on a public health initiative in Central America, or study abroad students in eastern Europe volunteering at a local school.

In all three of these approaches, people with means volunteer time and resources in hopes to help, serve, or partner with those in less privileged communities. Because I noticed such similar themes in research on the impact of these three approaches, for the purposes of this project, I consider the terms interchangeable. The trips that Aspiras hosts include elements of all three of these concepts. It is for that reason that I focused my research on all three, and though I may say “volunteer tourism” in one sentence and “international volunteering” in another, I am referencing the same kind of experience. [I should note that there is a large, well established international volunteer sector that focuses on environmental issues, sustainability, and animal welfare projects. Tens of millions of Google search results confirm this. That said, my research deals mainly with human subjects and social structures, so I did not seek out information about the aforementioned sector. It is outside the scope of my project.]

Most literature surrounding volunteer tourism focuses on the impact it has on individuals, so we will start there.

**Individuals and volunteering.*****Positives.***

On a general level, volunteering has been linked to resume strengthening, job networking opportunities, and positive health benefits like lower stress levels, (Habitat for Humanity, 2019). Building off that, many positive outcomes, such as increased self-esteem and self-confidence, have been noted in research surrounding individuals and the experiences they have during and after international volunteer trips. Sherraden, Lough, and Bopp (2013) write, when referring to Mezirow's transformative learning theory, that when emotional experiences are paired with guided reflection, "culture shock" can be turned into cultural learning (Sherraden et al., 2013). Common outcomes in students, according to various studies, can be: Cross-cultural and international skills, intercultural sensitivity and tolerance, international understanding, forming a global vision, increased future service at home or abroad, and changes in attitude. Individuals often realize their own privileges while participating in volunteering experiences. They come to understand global realities, and many develop a stronger belief in their ability and responsibility to make a difference in the world. Many volunteers continue to stay engaged in helping others upon returning home after volunteering (Sherraden et al., 2013, ). As a result of international volunteering experiences, students can also gain leadership development, communication, teamwork, and management skills, growth in adaptability and flexibility, new or renewed spiritual beliefs, and an ability to analyze and appreciate local customs and culture. (Nickols, Rothenberg, Moshi, & Tetloff, 2013).

*Negatives.*

Before leaving for an international volunteer experience, there can be some negative feelings. Individuals may feel anxiety about unknown scenarios, or feel doubts and insecurities about their ability to contribute to whatever it is they are going to do (Nickols et al., 2013). Volunteering can also cost thousands of dollars depending on the distance, and take months of planning. While on a service experience, there could be a number of emotional and physical issues.

When traveling to other countries, there is always the possibility of becoming sick from various unfamiliar illnesses via food, water, or by air. People could feel fatigued from travel, or upset with the heavily scheduled aspect of group volunteering. Feeling homesick is a possibility, and there could also be issues and annoyances that result from living with a group of people. Forming groups takes time. People have to build trust and grow into an effective unit, but there are conflicts that arise (Nickols et al., 2013), and different personalities may clash. It can be difficult and stressful for individuals to witness poverty, bringing up a level of internal struggle and tension. This could be even more harmful if individuals are not given opportunities for reflection and processing (Kiely, 2004).

When Individuals return home after volunteering internationally, it can be a struggle to translate what they just learned into how they live and interact at home. This internal struggle with the outside world after an international service learning experience is called the “Chameleon Complex,” according to Kiely (2004). Other aspects of this complex could be having feelings of not being understood or getting defensive responses when sharing about experiences. Individuals often feel like they have to hide any transformation or perspective

change that may have happened from others so as not to make things awkward or lose friends. Another struggle noted in this research was one of fighting to resist consumerism and capitalist ideals. People may have a desire to do good in their home community, but there tends to be a disconnect between their wants and actions, due to external restraints. For example, one may desire to be more socially conscious with their food and clothing purchases, and work for a nonprofit, but they feel pressure from family to shop a certain way and there is little access to jobs in the nonprofit sector in their area. Additionally, Kiely (2004) states that there is not enough research to prove that long term transformation happens to those participating in volunteering abroad (Kiely, 2004).

***Best Practices (for trip leaders & volunteers).***

Deep thought should be put into all aspects of the experience, from program design to follow up opportunities with volunteers. One tip for having success and satisfaction for volunteers is the opportunity for them to participate in the host community (Crabtree, 2008). When volunteers get to interact with people in the host community it makes their experience more meaningful. That being said, one cannot just throw a person into a cross cultural volunteering experience and expect transformation and perspective change. Simply being immersed in and/or interacting with a cross cultural community does not automatically equal a change in mindset or a positive experience. According to Crabtree, there should be a focus on preparing volunteers, and offering help to process, both during and after an experience. Some subjects they noted as important to bring attention to are poverty, inequity, injustice, historical and political issues in the host community, leadership and team building, reflecting on spirituality and morality, and preparing for specific projects like health or construction. Another



thought is that in order for the volunteer work to be responsible and ethical, an understanding of the complexities and history surrounding development should be included (Crabtree, 2008).

Many scholars believe that people cannot do effective work without understanding things like power structures and the historical background of the region they will be visiting.

Another important piece is making space for ongoing discussion to reflect on experiences. Reflection contributes to psychological growth (Sherraden et al., 2013); therefore, ongoing reflection and dialogue is critical to the learning process and to having a transformative experience. Both verbal and written reflections are especially important when it comes to challenging one's own opinions through critical thinking and developing intercultural competence. There is large potential for volunteers to develop a changed perspective on life, but they have to be given opportunities to individually and collectively work through different thoughts. It would be helpful to, daily (or at least every other day), ask groups about their observations, surprises, challenges, and positive experiences. Reflection helps individuals connect experiences to their own life in a way that will positively affect them in the future (Nickols et al., 2013). If reflection does not happen, there is actually a risk of volunteers' "prejudices and ethnocentric views" being solidified. People may go into an experience with preconceived notions about a certain people group that aren't necessarily true. If they then interact with that group, have a negative experience, and never discuss it, those original skewed thoughts could be solidified. This could lead to a decrease in tolerance and cultural understanding, as well as an incomplete knowledge of issues surrounding global poverty. Training volunteers before the trip begins has been linked to an increase in knowledge and more intercultural awareness (Sherraden et al., 2013). In cross cultural trips, everyone brings a

different lens through which they see the world. Volunteers, if not properly trained or debriefed, could judge a different culture through their own lens. Considering the broad differences between various cultures, this leaves much room for inaccurate understanding. That is why, among many other reasons, continued education and dialogue is so important.

Service projects themselves should be relational, with ongoing interpersonal interaction between volunteers and host communities. They should also be equitable, with local input being sought in both the planning and implementation processes. This might look like the sending organizations (or those that organize and lead volunteer trips) asking local leaders in advance about the needs in their communities, seeing what type of support they want, and then creating a plan with them. A relational and equitable service project would also look like volunteers working alongside locals, building relationships, and learning from them while helping. The focus should be on community based projects, with substantial involvement from locals. Research shows better results within cross cultural contact when the visitors (or volunteers) and the hosts are interdependent, sharing tasks, and having interpersonal experiences in cooperative situations (Crabtree, 2008). This means that volunteers are coming to help *alongside* local people, doing things *with* them, not just for them.

For volunteers, going back to their home area can be very difficult, so there should be opportunities for follow-up reflection and group discussion. This can help with long term change in individuals. In a longitudinal study done on a 22 person service learning trip to Nicaragua, students' reflections were followed for seven years after their trip. Through analyzing journals and reflection papers, six types of individual transformation were discovered. In short, these were *political*, rethinking one's role as a citizen, *intellectual*, thinking about origins of social

problems, *moral*, increased empathy and obligation to empower the poor, *cultural*, recognizing privilege and questioning ideologies and norms, *personal*, reevaluating one's daily choices and relationships, and *spiritual*, reflecting on one's role in society and forming a new look on religion/faith. In this study, group leaders were able to help volunteers understand the types of transformations they were having, and the potential challenges they may face upon going home. They suggested students develop action plans and do additional reading back home to help them continue to be a part of social action in their communities (Kiely, 2004). Many of them did go on to live their lives with a different mindset and actions than they did before the service learning trip.

This study is a good illustration of the types of transformation that that can happen in individuals on volunteering experiences such as these. Though not all reflection and follow up opportunities have to be this extensive, some type of written reflection is a good idea, along with group discussion. It is also beneficial to begin preparing individuals for their return home a day or so in advance, thinking about how things may be different. Then, having follow-up discussions after returning is a good way to continue processing experiences.

### **Host communities and volunteering.**

#### ***Positives.***

When host communities interact with volunteers for a prolonged time, it allows the “server” to learn and think differently, getting to know the locals on a deeper level. This can be empowering for local people. Those interpersonal connections build understanding. Without interpersonal connection, locals may keep being seen in terms of concepts or stereotypes (Camacho, 2004). In the same way that volunteers often have changed thoughts and gain

intercultural understanding as a result of interaction with locals, local people can have similar types of experiences when interacting with visitors. International visitors can bring new perspective and insight to host communities, and help increase tolerance (Tiessen & Lough, 2018).

Some volunteers offer specialized skills to people, like leadership, communication, building, and language and literacy. When host organizations/communities partner with outside organizations/volunteers, it helps get them access to resources they might not otherwise have access to. Volunteers provide extra hands for organizations and provide immediate support and material resources. Highly skilled volunteers like doctors, lawyers or agricultural experts are even more effective in strengthening local organizations and individuals in communities. When volunteers are humble in their actions, and work alongside their host community members, it can actually help reduce colonial stereotypes (Tiessen & Lough, 2018).

While there is widespread research on what volunteers experience during international service experiences, the impact of short term volunteers on host communities, and their perspectives of said volunteers, is largely understudied. There is plenty of literature about effective development, but the question of how short term volunteers fit into those longer term projects, and whether or not that has many positive effects, needs a lot more research. I found many more potential negative impacts than I did positive ones.

### *Negatives.*

Depending on the type of trip and the way it is organized, sometimes the students and universities benefit more than the communities where the service takes place (Crabtree, 2008). Host communities or hosting organizations often have many costs and responsibilities when it

comes to volunteers. They may have to supervise them, do orientations, language training or translating, provide housing, health care, transportation, and other types of support. Having volunteers come takes time and resources, and it is often a big burden. Many times, communities have no say in who comes to help them or where resources go. Sometimes, they do not even help pick the projects (Sherraden et al., 2013). When this is the case, it is problematic, and potentially harmful. Situations like this happen often, when volunteers project their own opinions and values on host communities and they may not share the same desires. For example, a volunteer group may really want to paint a school for someone, but never take the time to figure out that the local community just wanted school supplies for their students. A common occurrence is when volunteers do tasks with which they have no experience, or very simple tasks that require no skill, both of which a local could be hired to do. In those scenarios, the only people empowered are the visitors. Volunteers often have little to contribute, with no specialized skills, and very little knowledge of the local language. Researchers Tiessen and Lough (2018), in an article about international volunteering, write that these types of behaviors have been noted as negatives of volunteer visitors. Other problems noted by locals about volunteers were a lack of commitment, favoring their own opinions over those of the locals, and unfulfilled promises of following up with support of the community even after leaving (Tiessen & Lough, 2018).

According to Guttentag (2009), people tend to go on volunteer trips for both altruistic reasons and for self-gratification. In order to attract people to be a part of volunteer programs, satisfying volunteers becomes a big priority for certain sending organizations, especially if it is a private company. A big concern is that the market for volunteer tourism is focused more on monetary profit and visitors' desires than the needs of communities (Guttentag, 2009). Short

term volunteer trips are sometimes shown to be less helpful in effective capacity development of organizations, because relationships help development, and the short term nature of volunteer trips is not often conducive to lasting relationship building (Tiessen & Lough, 2018). Volunteers often get a level of freedom that they would not get at home. For example, many times when volunteers go to schools in foreign low-income areas, they will be given the chance to teach children, even though they have no teaching degree. Volunteers will also pick up and hold children, and take pictures with them. Never, under any circumstance that I can think of in the United States, would an unskilled stranger be allowed on an elementary school property to teach children they do not know, pick them up, take photos with them, and post those photos on the internet. These types of behaviors are dehumanizing and tokenizing to locals in communities where people go to volunteer, but they happen on a regular basis, and can be harmful.

When volunteer experiences are more about completing a project than building a relational connection, volunteers' stereotypes of locals can be solidified. Before even beginning a trip, advertising and promotional material often display poor locals in foreign communities with some type of emotional appeal about "making a difference" or "fighting poverty." These types of advertisements reduce humans to words, ideas, or concepts. It simplifies their situations, and portrays them as "other." If volunteers only meet few, if any, locals while they are seeking to help, there is risk of them not understanding the complexity of poverty and/or not valuing local strengths and culture. They are then likely to leave with the same "other" view of the locals that they had when they arrived. Also, when it is all about the project, or delivering some type of material gift, it could lead to greater dependency on visiting groups (Guttentag, 2009).

Another potential negative is called the *demonstration effect* (especially influential on young people), when a host culture is impacted by visitors drawing attention to their lifestyles and openly displaying objects of wealth. Locals could respond by trying to imitate the patterns of the visitors, and then be discontent when that type of lifestyle is not available where they live. Also, when visitors display wealth casually, it can accentuate differences between their culture and the host culture. These actions separate people instead of bringing them together. Openly displaying wealth may lead to jealousy or cause young people to develop desires that may be impossible for them to attain (Guttentag, 2009). In an article about power and privilege published in the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, author Camacho (2004) shares interesting ideas about power, class, and volunteering.

There is a school of thought that suggests things like charity and international volunteering only perpetuate power and class structures. Camacho (2004) references ideas from Vron Ware, and the book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” in her article, which speak of a history filled with power and domination, and question the motivations of charity and philanthropy efforts. Some think they are used as tools to regulate class differences and ensure privilege for higher classes. Another question researchers ask is if service is another way that those with power and education name the problems of those in lower classes, and reinforce their positions of power (Camacho, 2004). A concept worth bringing up is “White Savior” or “Savior Complex.”

The most common demographic of volunteers is young, white, affluent, and educated (Sharraden et al., 2013). The “white savior complex” is essentially when a person or group of people, with money and power, assumes that they are the ones who should be saving poor people

by doing something for them or giving something to them. It is popularly used in reference to white people volunteering in Africa, but is not unique to Africa, and in fact, is not only unique to white people. Examples of this concept in action might look like any of the following: foreign volunteers doing jobs that a local could get paid to do, volunteer tourists taking photos of people and posting them without permission, people in westernized countries seeking to adopt a child from Africa with the assumption that they are saving them, volunteers going back to their communities after their trips and reducing people to comments like, “they have nothing, but they’re so happy” (Guarino, 2018). A group of white people volunteering in low income cross-cultural situations is not automatically harmful, but there are things to consider. For example, historical information regarding race, class and power, length of trips, development practices, level of volunteer training, and the level of collaboration with locals. Depending on the design of the volunteer program, charity efforts have potential to enhance local people’s shame, increase dependence on outside aid (Corbett & Fikkert, 2014), and reinforce negative stereotypes and power structures.

### ***Best Practices.***

Negative impacts are not inevitable during cross-cultural volunteering, but neither are positive impacts. This can be helped with proper training and preparation for volunteers, as well as good management of volunteers during their visit. The focus should be on learning. Hosting organizations should have opportunities for interactions between visitors/volunteers and local community members (Guttentag, 2009). They should make it a priority to get to know people visiting and continue building those relationships. Because there are so many factors to consider with volunteers, host communities should decide when, how, where, and if they want volunteers



to come. Many times, local community members will not be honest about their feelings toward volunteers, so encouraging honesty is important for making programs effective. One of the best things a host community can do is be honest about how they view volunteers coming, and build collaborative relationships with outside organizations.

### **Research Questions**

Before embarking on this research journey, I had a few tentative questions. Considering these initial thoughts is what eventually led me to the research questions that drove this project. The basis of these initial questions came from my personal experience, combined with my knowledge of what Aspiras does. In order to provide background and context for where my research questions come from, the next few paragraphs include reflections of my early experiences living in Zambia.

When I lived in Zambia, I made many well-meaning but privilege-soaked, ignorant mistakes. To name a few of these mistakes: I picked up and took selfies with children whose full names I did not know, nor had I met their parents; I wore culturally disrespectful clothing in public (e.g. short running shorts); and I took pictures of my neighbors' homes with such carelessness that it was as if they were an exhibit in a natural history museum. I wish I could say those were the only cringeworthy things I did. Why were these "cringeworthy," one may ask?

First of all, it would be absolutely absurd, and maybe even illegal, of me to go into a random American neighborhood and start picking up young children, hugging them, and taking pictures with them. Why did I think it was okay to do that in Zambia? I'll leave that question rhetorical because I think the answer to it is multi-faceted, probably has a lot to do with how I was socialized to view African people, and could be a whole other project in itself. Secondly, I

wore running shorts in a rural village where it was culturally inappropriate for women to show their legs. Having only lived there a couple weeks, I was still a visitor, and I was wearing what I wanted with no regard for local customs, or for how my breaking of social norms would reflect on the organization with whom I was working. Lastly, I took pictures of my neighbors' homes without asking. I wouldn't dream of being invited into an American neighbor's home and immediately start taking pictures of their yard, house, and kitchen without asking. Again, I do not know why I thought it was okay to do that, especially when some of the older people may never have seen a camera. I was not seeing them as individuals. I was treating them as a tourist attraction. Thank God that my Zambian neighbors were incredibly forgiving and patient with me. I sincerely hope that the next two years of genuine relationship building made up for my original offenses. I am a walking, living, breathing example of the journey toward global consciousness. I learned some things the hard and embarrassing way, but those lessons really sunk in. Now that you have a little context, we can fast forward four years to when I reconnected with the founder of Aspiras (an old friend of mine).

Knowing my background in nonprofit work and volunteering, he asked me to join his organization. He told me all about this exciting new nonprofit, helping uplift Dominican youth and their families through soccer. I learned that Aspiras helped give material and educational support to soccer clubs in low income areas, and that they partnered with college student organizations. I also learned that Aspiras was planning to have annual volunteer trips for college students to visit the Dominican Republic. Knowing all too well the potential mistakes untrained volunteers could make, I offered to help with some volunteer training. When I found out that Aspiras had no volunteer training content in place, and no current plans for training, I thought it

was a great opportunity for me to get involved. My passion fit their need and I thought, “*What is the best way to train volunteers before they serve internationally?*” Knowing that volunteers visiting a foreign, low-income community doesn’t necessarily equal something positive, my next thought was, “*What are some potential negatives of Aspiras volunteer trips to the Dominican Republic?*”

Delving deeper into my literature review, I began to read articles that had more negative views of volunteering. I read viewpoints that compared service learning to using developing countries as “global playgrounds” for the purpose of “poverty tourism” (Sherraden et al., 2013). Some of these articles painted volunteering as an exploitative practice. One article referenced ideas from “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, claiming that initiatives like philanthropy and charity are rooted in power and domination and serve to regulate class difference (Camacho, 2004). The question was asked, to what extent do activities like service learning (primarily done by white, affluent people), continue to feed the status quo of privilege and oppression? As I read these thoughts, I began to question, “*Should Aspiras volunteer trips happen at all?*”

Reading more, I found information on effective community development practices and the lasting benefits of volunteering and service learning. I also read about the potential positives for host communities, and I heard first hand about positives from Dominican community members. So yes, I do believe Aspiras volunteer trips should happen, but there should be much attention given to planning, preparation, facilitation, and follow-up. With so many important elements to include in the volunteer trips Aspiras offers, I thought, “*What is the best way to facilitate these trips?*”

It was all of my reading and reflection that eventually led to the three driving research questions behind this project.

1. What does the literature say about volunteering pros and cons?
2. What are volunteer perspectives on Aspiras volunteer trips?
3. What are host perspectives on Aspiras volunteer trips?

### **Methodology**

For my personal research, I traveled to the Dominican Republic as part of a college student volunteer trip from Western Michigan University. I observed and conducted qualitative interviews with Dominican coaches and community members at the various soccer clubs we went to visit. Upon returning to the U.S., I had a different set of questions to ask the college students that went on the trip. My goal in interviewing/surveying was to get information that was tailored to Aspiras. I wanted to gain insight from both volunteers and host communities in the Dominican Republic, hoping to see if there were common themes in what individuals self reported about their experiences with Aspiras. I wanted to provide this data to Aspiras to inform and enhance the way they set up their volunteer experiences. My thought was that collecting both perspectives through interview questions (along with research from the literature review) would specifically equip Aspiras with what they need to create a comprehensive, mutually beneficial volunteer program that is tailored to their sphere of influence.

I sent a proposal for my research to the Western Michigan Institutional Review board, but it was decided that I did not need further approval from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). My interviews were not collecting private information from individuals, and the scope of the project did not meet the federal definition of a human subject (See Appendix

B). I had two different interview scripts, one for college students, and one for community members in the Dominican Republic.

College student interview scripts included questions about expectations, preparedness, and positives and negatives about their trip experience. Dominican coaches and community member interview scripts included questions about experiences with Aspiras, views of volunteers coming to visit, and what they want people to know about their communities (full interview scripts found in appendices C & D).

The interviews in the Dominican Republic were conducted in English with a Spanish translator for those who only spoke Spanish. Interviews took place in a casual setting, mostly at soccer clubs with children practicing soccer (fútbol) in the background. I talked with coaches and community members at the different soccer clubs we went to visit. Depending on the situation, I wrote notes during interviews, or shortly thereafter. I then transcribed all the notes to digital documents and looked for themes in people's answers. I read through the interview answers multiple times, and put certain phrases in categories together. For example, any time a coach or community member mentioned positive experiences with Aspiras, I put that in a category. Due to lack of availability, the interviews with college students looked different.

The preliminary time of conducting interviews fell on a college exam week. Due to this conflict, most students did not have time for an in-person interview during that week. Directly after exam week, our volunteer group went to the Dominican Republic. At the end of our trip, we had two small focus group discussions covering some of the topics on the college student interview script. I took notes on our conversations. Upon returning to the U.S., we were not able to conduct in-person interviews, because people returned to their hometowns for the summer. I

ended up using the interview script for college students like a survey. I emailed the survey digitally, and people sent back their completed versions. Those who did not fill one out digitally wrote their answers in person once the school year started. I transcribed those paper surveys into digital form, so that all of the answers were in one place. I also sent surveys to college students from Indiana University (another Aspiras partner university), because they had a volunteer trip in the Dominican Republic directly after WMU's.

<b>Community Member Interviews</b>		
Interviewee	Gender	Ethnicity
I 1	M	Dominican
I 2	F	Dominican
I 3	M	Dominican
I 4	F	Columbian
I 5	M	Dominican
I 6	M	Dominican
I 7	F	Puerto Rican

<b>Volunteer Interviews</b>		
Volunteer	Gender	Ethnicity
V1	F	US/Caucasian
V2	F	US/Caucasian
V3	F	US/Caucasian
V4	F	US/Caucasian
V5	M	US/Caucasian
V6	M	US/Caucasian
V7	M	US/Caucasian
V8	M	Dominican
V9	M	Dominican

I conducted interviews with seven individuals in the “community member” category, and nine in the “volunteer” category. I organized the interviews in an online document. I turned each question into a section title. I then made bullet points under each section and copied and pasted everyone's answers into the corresponding section. After organizing all of the interview answers, I read and reread answers in order to find themes across individuals' experiences. I used the finder function in the online document to search words like “fun,” and “help,” to see if there were any words that showed up in high volume. I then looked at what the context was for the

way people were using the words. That approach of searching specific words was only useful for a couple of words. There are many ways to say the same thing, so only using the document search approach would have missed a lot. I was able to identify more themes by reading the answers multiple times, and writing down different phrases that fit together. For example, phrases like, “grow as a person,” and “taught me to be a better leader,” I put in a section with personal growth, where things like, “culture shock,” and “eye opening,” went in a global awareness category.

### **Findings & Discussion**

Reading through interview responses and analyzing information was both interesting and encouraging. Interesting, because I heard perspectives that I was not anticipating, and encouraging, because the work that Aspiras USA does is overwhelmingly perceived as a positive. The following paragraphs will expand on my findings, illuminating themes in what Dominican community members and coaches reported, and themes in what college student volunteers reported. I will also touch briefly on the demographics of volunteers, and subjects covered in our focus group discussions. While in the Dominican Republic, I had the chance to speak with seven different people. These were a mix of coaches/directors at soccer clubs, community members, and one Aspiras staff person. The full interview script for the Dominican coaches and community members can be found in Appendix C.

#### **Community Member Interviews**

The themes discovered in these DR interviews were community struggles, positives about their clubs, and positives about Aspiras and volunteers. The first thing I noticed in their responses was the mention of how positive their programs were. The purpose of the interviews

was to ask about Aspiras, but more often than not, people began by talking about their communities and how important their soccer clubs are to them. We visited clubs all over the country including places like Santo Domingo, Bayaguana, Nagua, and Cabarete. Each place was slightly different, but still in a low income area. Six out of the seven people I talked with mentioned something about the struggles they face in their area, and how meaningful it was to have a soccer club because of that. Problems spoken of included teen pregnancy, drugs, crime, poverty, and immigration.

**Theme: community struggles (selected quotes).**

*Community Member (Santo Domingo) - “This club and the church next door encourage kids to be off the streets . . . it’s a bad area . . .”*

*Coach (Santo Domingo) - “When I grew up in this area there was a lot of drugs and crime . . .”*

*Aspiras Staff (Santo Domingo) - “Cristo Rey is a really bad area. It’s like when people talk about the really bad cities in the states like Chicago and NYC. That’s what Cristo Rey is for the Santo Domingo area. This is the place rappers sing and rap about.”*

*Coach (Bayaguana) - “. . . kids drop out of school . . . many girls drop out because they get pregnant and drop out. They grow up seeing their mom taking care of kids and staying at home, so when they get to a certain age, it’s like, ‘okay, what are you going to do now to help?’ So 1 in 10 girls in the DR get pregnant before they are 15.”*



*Coach (Nagua) - “. . . Many of the coaches have to pay for materials for the club. They buy it because it’s the only way the kids can play . . . Here, because of the poorness, people aren’t always nice.”*

*Director (Cabarete) - “Cabarete is a very poor tourist town . . . many of the kids are Haitian.”*

\*The director at the club in Cabarete spoke of the challenges children from Haiti face when they come to the Dominican Republic with their families, seeking a better life. They don’t speak Spanish, live in very poor situations, and are generally not openly welcomed in the community.

All of the people I spoke with had twofold statements about their communities. Each negative statement regarding challenges in the area was met with a positive one about how their fútbol program and/or Aspiras makes a positive impact in the face of those challenges. I separated out positive comments into three sections: comments made about community programs, comments about Aspiras, and comments made about volunteers. I separated Aspiras from the volunteers, because Aspiras in itself is a constant in the Dominican Republic. They are supporting and providing resources even when their volunteers are not there. Though there are some similarities in statements, I see them as two separate categories.

**Theme: program positives (selected quotes).**

*“Coaching is a blessing . . . I love being able to coach all the kids.”*

*“This club is super positive . . . It’s super positive because it’s a bad area and it gets them something to do.”*

*“For me, playing soccer is a way out of that lifestyle [crime and drugs]. Now, I like to be able to do that for kids.”*

*“ 2,000 kids come here every day . . . This sports complex really gives life to the community. Kids have something positive to do . . . They learn positive values through sports. . . This sports complex has a lot of girls involved in sports, so it’s positive. . . It encourages kids not to be like the rappers and what they talk about.”*

*“. . . A place where kids have an opportunity to have a better life . . . This place is like heaven.”*

Each sports club we went to had dedicated staff, coaches, etc., that had a passion for investing in youth and giving them a positive place to be where they can learn positive values. Some coaches had been in places for 16 + years. All of these places exist outside of Aspiras. They are run by community members. Where Aspiras comes in is providing extra support and resources so that they can continue to grow and run their clubs. In Bayaguana, there is a sports complex that was built by the government for an olympic event, but then was never maintained, so now the majority of resources are donated. Aspiras was born out of this club. The founders of Aspiras had played there as children, and many years later they heard from a coach that they were struggling to have practices because they didn’t have enough resources. It was a clothing and soccer gear drive for that club that sparked the entire organization. Many people from the interviews mentioned their club’s limited resources, and that Aspiras helps them in that area.

**Theme: Aspiras positives (selected quotes).**

*“When we visit the clubs we support, we teach the values of Aspiras and do other special clinics. Something different than the normal day-to-day practices.”*

*“Aspiras is like an angel to us. They give us resources to be able to run the club. When Aspiras brings things, they feel like they can breathe [referring to coaches].”*

*“When Aspiras comes to visit, it is like heaven. They bring new ideas, new games, it is exciting for kids, and very helpful.”*

I thought it was interesting that multiple people referred to Aspiras as something heavenly, in different clubs as well. Aspiras was seen as an “angel,” to some, and their visits described as “heaven” for others. I thought this showed how valuable communities perceive them around the Dominican Republic.

**Theme: volunteer positives (selected quotes).**

*“When volunteers come, some of the kids that don’t go to soccer club all the time or stopped coming, come again . . . volunteers bring excitement”*

*“As for volunteers, some when they come have a charisma and interact with the kids. That’s good.”*

*“When volunteers come it’s like hope.”*

\*This particular coach talked about how they can feel kind of closed off from the world sometimes. They live in an area with a lot of poverty. He mentioned that when volunteers or

people come to visit, it is an encouragement. Seeing that people from around the world care about them, it's like a symbol of hope.

*“[talking about how volunteers are helpful] Especially on Saturday, because it gives the staff a break, for volunteers to help out a little running activities.”*

There was a definite theme of excitement when people talked about Aspiras and volunteers coming to visit their clubs. Many people talked about volunteers being seen as exciting, and “something new” from their day-to-day practices. People mentioned that having volunteers run practices gives coaches a break, and brings new fun ideas. The overall perception I noted among interviewees was that volunteers were seen as a positive source of encouragement and support.

When asked about potential negatives of volunteers, only two people mentioned something. One coach talked about how it was great when volunteers were positive and interacted with kids, and then said, *“but some may not do that and go off to the side, not being very interactive.”* He made it seem that it is better when people are interactive with the kids. The other person was a director at a school we went to visit, and she said, *“For volunteers, anything less than a month is not helpful. You have to know the organization and get to know the kids.”* I think she was speaking more about volunteers that sign up to come be a part of their school, because directly after this comment was when she mentioned how great it is when Aspiras volunteers come. I have to admit, I was anticipating more feedback regarding positives and negatives about volunteers coming. There could be many reasons this did not happen, but just a few come to mind.

First, perhaps the coaches genuinely did not see many negatives in volunteers coming to visit. Second, The trip that we were on was only the second group of WMU students that came to the Dominican Republic. Aside from that, I don't know what the volume of visitors is like. I do know that sometimes, study abroad students at the local university in Santo Domingo visit the club there. That being said, the most frequent visitors to the soccer clubs may just be the Dominican Aspiras staff that comes out to support throughout the year. It could be that there have not been enough volunteer interactions for locals at soccer clubs to observe potential negatives. Lastly, there is always a chance that people could have not shared some of their true opinions. Sometimes, in situations when foreign volunteers are asking locals questions, they answer how they think they should, not how they actually feel (Sharraden et al., 2013). I am not saying for certain that any of the previous statements are the definite reason I did not receive much feedback on the pros and cons of volunteers. However, my guess is that it has something to do with the low volume of volunteers, and the fact that experiences have genuinely been mostly positive.

Local community members and coaches overwhelmingly reported having a positive relationship and view of Aspiras and their volunteers. Essentially, my field research speaking with locals in the Dominican confirmed what one can read on the Aspiras website. Their website talks about inspiring children and their communities to seek better futures. They talk about the values that they teach, investing in children, and what they do when they visit clubs. "Every year, we visit each soccer club that we work with to expose our volunteers to real-life situations, to connect with the communities, and to monitor changes and progress" (Aspiras Foundation,

2019). Based on what people say about them, they seem to be accurately living out the statements on their website.

### **Volunteer Interviews**

The next set of interview questions were for college student volunteers that went on the trip. I distributed emails to twenty people that attended a volunteer trip in the Dominican Republic. I received nine responses. The majority of the responses came from Caucasian Americans, along with two Dominicans. There was an almost even split between number of males and females. This is consistent with the earlier statistic shared about the majority of people going to volunteer in other countries being white, affluent, and educated (Sherraden et al., 2013). I cannot speak to whether or not all of these volunteers were affluent, but I can confirm that most were white and educated. That being said, there were not very noticeable differences in the reflection of caucasian Americans vs. individuals from other countries.

The biggest difference I noticed was in the Dominican volunteers' responses about their observations of global realities. While the American volunteers said things like, "*The volunteer trip is very eye opening when visiting poor countries,*" the Dominican responses were more personal, "*I learned about the situation of my home country and got a better understanding of what it takes to help people in need.*" The Americans experienced cultural dissonance that natives didn't, because of language barriers and cultural differences, but when it came to observations about poverty, and shifting global perspectives, people had similar reflections across ethnic backgrounds. Volunteer motivations were also all very similar.

The Aspiras group from Western Michigan University included Americans, Dominicans, and an individual from Spain. In focus groups before traveling to the Dominican Republic, we

discussed motivations and expectations for the trip. Common discussion themes were wanting to help people in need, teach and inspire kids, and a desire to give back. These motivations expressed were the same across all of the ethnic backgrounds represented.

Some prominent themes discovered in volunteer interviews were positive experiences with Aspiras, Personal growth and learning, global consciousness, and areas for improvement in volunteer trips. You can find the full volunteer interview script in appendix D.

**Theme: positive experiences (selected quotes).**

*“Joining Aspiras has been an amazing experience.”*

*“Fun and life changing.”*

*“I have met a lot of great people and traveled around my home country, expanding my knowledge along the way.”*

*“I have had a very wonderful experience, everyone is very welcoming & friendly.”*

*“I’ve enjoyed my experience with Aspiras so far.”*

*“I have had a great experience so far, I have made so many lifelong friends and memories.”*

The first question for college student volunteers was “Tell me about your experience with Aspiras so far. . . “ Every person who responded said that they have had a positive experience being a part of Aspiras. Later on, there were specific negatives about certain aspects of the volunteer trip experience. However, there were no negatives mentioned about being in the organization in general. The reasons college students did not mention negatives could be similar to my speculations regarding the lack of negative responses from the Dominican coaches and community members. It could be that they answered how they thought they were supposed to answer. It could also be that their most salient thoughts about Aspiras are positive and they

couldn't think of many, or any, negatives. Motivations aside, there were a variety of positive experiences reported by volunteers. People mentioned meeting new friends, gains in personal development, learning, and having fun.

**Theme: personal growth and learning (selected quotes).**

*"I have learned so much about not only myself, but also about Dominican culture . . ."*

*"It has helped me to grow as a person with being humble . . ."*

*"I have grown my communication skills by working on an amazing team . . ."*

*"Aspiras has helped me obtain a different viewpoint in life . . ."*

Personal growth and learning were common themes among interview responses. Comments included areas of personal growth such as becoming more humble, becoming better at communication, being open minded, learning about oneself, and having a more knowledgeable outlook on life. I noticed that students were mentioning a number of skills they learned while being a part of Aspiras on their college campuses. I then noticed different types of learning when they talked about their experience traveling to the Dominican Republic. I decided to split up this section into two subcategories. These subcategories are "organizational skills," and "global awareness."

**Theme: organizational skills (selected quotes).**

*"I have grown my communication skills by working on an amazing team."*

*"Experience running meetings . . ."*

*"It has taught me a lot of things about how to run an organization and leadership."*



*“I have been working with Aspiras for 3 years and so far, I have learned a lot about non-profit organizations and their work.”*

*“ . . . it’s taught me the challenges of running an organization and working with university regulations.”*

Reading through people’s experiences with Aspiras on their college campuses, it appeared to me that people were developing various organizational communication skills. Students had experienced starting and running a college student organization, dealing with university policies, planning and running weekly meetings, learning about nonprofits, planning community impact ideas, planning how to grow donations for the Dominican, and learning communication skills.

**Theme: global awareness (selected quotes).**

*“Aspiras has helped me to obtain a different viewpoint in life . . .”*

*“Aspiras has impacted the way I see the world and changed what impact I believe I can have on the world.”*

*“I realize how privileged I am and I am grateful for my life.”*

*“Culture shock, inclusion, diversity”*

*“Helped me see more of the problems in my home country . . .”*

*“I learned how to interact with native people at clubs. The volunteer trip is very eye opening when visiting poor countries.”*

*“It was nice to connect with people of different backgrounds through soccer.”*

*“I learned about the situation of my home country and got a better understanding of what it takes to help people in need.”*

*“I also wasn’t sure how accepting the kids would be, but they were overwhelmingly friendly to us.”*

*“Variety of socioeconomic status (important for us to see a wealthy club vs. a poor club)”*

*“We got to see a whole new culture and way of life”*

The University of Wisconsin-Superior describes a globally aware individual as someone who, “has the knowledge, competencies, values, and dispositions to act in an informed manner, demonstrate empathy, engage in effective intergroup communication, and build community across social, cultural, political, environmental, geographic, and economic boundaries” (University of Wisconsin, 2010). I think of global awareness as a continuum. There is always more to learn and room to grow. Regarding the Aspiras volunteer trip, there are definite geographic, social, cultural, political, and economic boundaries between the college volunteers and the people with whom they interacted in the Dominican Republic.

There were even social and economic differences between the Dominican students in our group and the people in the communities in which we volunteered. A common theme I found in interview responses was growth in some areas of global awareness. There were many responses about learning more about the world and different problems people face. There were comments about observing different cultural values and experiencing another language. People also mentioned aspects about growing by interacting with people who are different than they are. One person mentioned learning to be more open minded as a result of spending time in the Dominican and “*never knowing what might happen.*” He was referring to the laid back culture that he experienced there.

Many people talked about becoming aware of problems, and gaining a new outlook on life, after witnessing poverty and interacting with people of a different culture. There were also comments about their own belief in their ability to have an impact on the world. This speaks to their growth in knowledge of cultures and ability to interact and build community across various boundaries. According to interview responses, I believe volunteers did take steps toward more global awareness on their trip. There is still much room for growth.

A few people spoke about realizing their privilege and gaining a new appreciation for what they have and the lifestyle they live. This may seem positive at first glance, but an individual realizing socioeconomic differences and their own privilege does not automatically equal a positive outcome. Just because someone realizes that there is social injustice and material inequity in the world, doesn't mean that that realization will lead to a lasting perspective change, or an increase in social action in their lives. Yes, international service experiences tend to lead to increased service after returning home. And yes, they can also lead to intercultural understanding, communication skills, and developing a global awareness. However, many volunteering experiences don't challenge individuals to reflect on things like history, causes of poverty, and power imbalances. It is the continued education and time of reflection and discussion, before, during, and after the experience, that is critical to lasting perspective change (Sherraden et al., 2013). Without that piece, volunteer experiences are in danger of being nothing more than poverty tourism. Another crucial element to a mutually beneficial volunteer experience is reciprocity with local organizations, and building relationships.

Some volunteers in our group talked about learning that material wealth doesn't make happiness; rather, supportive communities/families do, because of what they saw in the DR.

Now, our Dominican friends did speak about how community oriented their culture is, and we did see happy people and supportive communities and families. That being said, we only got a snapshot of their lives. It is good to notice the positives in another culture, and it is also good to learn additional aspects about their communities, especially if they are the focus of the service taking place. It is important not to perpetuate the “poor-but-happy” narrative, because it reduces people to one emotion and minimizes the complexity of the issues people living in poverty face (Guttentag, 2009). While there is always room for deeper understanding, I think this volunteer reflection shows that there was cross cultural understanding and appreciation being built on the trip. We did spend the majority of our time interacting with locals and connecting with people, and it is likely that this reflection came as a result of our interpersonal experiences.

One of the interviews with a Dominican coach took shape in a group conversation, with everyone sitting in a circle in chairs, as he told us about his community. This was a small, rural community, and according to the coach, it was very close and positive.

*“The sports complex really gives life to the community. . . Everyone knows each other . . . People are very religious . . . The church is very involved. . . The first Friday of every month, thousands gather around the land around the church to bring what they’ve grown and made to sell.”*

Short term volunteer trips only provide a glimpse into others’ lives, so there should be discussions about the experiences people are having and what they are observing. Without discussions and learning, volunteers could remain with a simplistic and incomplete view of the people they intended to help, which may not help them at all. Learning about a community, getting to know people, and building relationships are keys to effective development.

**Theme: help.**

One of the most common words used in interview/survey responses was the word “*help*.” It appeared 20 times in interview answers and was used in multiple different contexts. It either had to do with personal development (helping oneself), or helping others.

***Personal.***

Statements focused on individuals included phrases like, “*Helped me to grow,*” “*helped me obtain a different worldview,*” and “*Helps me give back.*”

***Other.***

Comments with the word “help” in regard to helping others included statements like “*help soccer clubs,*” “*helping communities,*” “*helping others,*” “*helping people in need,*” and “*be helpful.*”

There was a strong desire to help others. This was a prevalent motivation for being a part of Aspiras, as well as an expectation for what would happen on the trip. I think with the desire to help being a key motivator for volunteers, discussing helpful behaviors is crucial. There should be a focus on the mindset and purpose of the trip. I believe it will help frame expectations and lead to increased satisfaction in and perception of volunteer experiences.

**Theme: volunteer trip areas for improvement (selected quotes).**

*“I would say the lack of communication in never knowing the plan was difficult to deal with. . .”*

*“Lack of communication.”*

*“Lack of planning and organization. There was constant confusion about the objectives and schedule to follow. The staff was not very communicative. . .”*

*“Time delays, no schedules. . .”*

*“ . . . I feel like once we were at clubs we were unprepared.”*

*“ . . . sometimes was unsure of task at hand.”*

*“Better planning and smaller groups.”*

Another overwhelming theme I discovered in interview responses was surrounding the organization of the trip itself. The biggest negative people noted was disorganization and a lack of planning. Right behind that was a lack of communication. People expressed frustration with not being told what they were going to do, what mindset they should be in, and not knowing the schedule. This was the second, and the largest, volunteer trip Aspiras had ever facilitated, and they had limited staff facilitating the group. Volunteers gave a lot of feedback about negatives and suggestions for improvement. There were 22 comments regarding lack of organization, planning, and scheduling. There were 9 responses about wanting better communication.

When it came to suggestions for future trips, there was some concern about what people did on their time outside of volunteer activities. The legal drinking age in the Dominican Republic is 18 years old, and everyone on the trip was legal to drink. Many volunteers expressed concern with people being under the influence too much. Because of the large-size group, and lack of organization, the group did not spend as much time at soccer clubs volunteering as they would have liked. This was a common feeling expressed in the interview responses. The overarching thought, even amongst those who took part in drinking during free time activities, was that they would have preferred not to go out as much and to have volunteered more.

*“I would like to see more discussion and learning experiences during the trip. Less alcohol. . .”*

*“Too much drinking, not enough volunteering.”*

Other thoughts mentioned by volunteers were wanting to get money in the local currency to be able to buy their own souvenirs. The group on this particular trip functioned like a family unit, if you will, where everyone pooled their money and paid for things together, so that people who only spoke English didn't have to worry about confusion in purchasing things. People did not get a chance to go to an ATM until the second half of the trip, which many would have liked to do at the beginning of the trip to be able to buy souvenirs. Other comments regarding improvements were about more training and education prior to and during the trip. Some people wanted more Spanish practice, blogging and travel tips, practice running soccer drills, and historical and cultural information about the DR.

I think these concerns are definitely something for Aspiras to consider in how they plan for future trips. Some concerns about organization and scheduling could be due to lack of planning, while some confusion could be because volunteers didn't understand the culture and/or language, and may not have had a clear picture of every situation. I think it is possible to have a well thought-out schedule, but also leave room for the unexpected, and use those experiences to discuss things about culture, politics, etc. It is good for people to be outside of their comfort zones, because that is where learning takes place. Learning is then furthered with reflection about experiences. Some scholars argue that the most powerful learning experiences are those that are unplanned, allowing students to become more empathetic and globally aware (Jeffries & Nguyen, 2014). Being that this was Aspiras' second volunteer trip, they were most likely still figuring out what works and what doesn't work, how to create schedules, and how to have a balance of volunteer time and free time.

**Theme: preparedness.**

When asked if they were prepared for the trip, six volunteers said they were and three said no. One volunteer gave information about what she would like to learn.

*“ . . . more about the culture, language, and about the places we were visiting. I would think it would be cool to do Spanish lessons more before the trip, also to give a brief history of cities and clubs we are going to visit.”*

I should point out that we had weekly, hour-long, volunteer trainings beginning one month before the trip. These covered discussions on poverty, worldview, facts about the Dominican Republic, culture, schedules, and Spanish lessons. Each volunteer was given a Spanish phrase sheet to study, and we practiced saying Spanish phrases in our meetings, too. A couple of the volunteers who expressed wishing they knew more about the culture and language also did not attend all of the volunteer trainings, and did not study their Spanish worksheet. That being said , there is definitely room for more Spanish lessons and practice, as well as more historical information and information about soccer clubs. Aspiras should decide how much they want to cover in volunteer training, and how much to save for experiential learning and discussion upon going to the DR. They should also consider the level of responsibility they want volunteers to have over their own preparation. For example, maybe they could provide a Spanish worksheet, but require that volunteers practice on their own.

**Conclusion**

This project covered a wide range of material. Beginning with a general overview of the Aspiras foundation, its mission and programming, it moved into topics around youth and community development. I discussed that the work Aspiras does fits under the umbrella of youth



and community development. They build relationships with soccer clubs in communities, partnering with them to help provide the material and educational resources they need to successfully run their clubs. Aspiras invests in youth through ensuring education and positive community activities for them to be involved in, like sports (Aspiras Foundation, 2019).

Because this project was focused on Aspiras' volunteers, I covered literature regarding different types of international service experiences. I believe the structure of Aspiras volunteer trips includes elements of volunteer tourism, international volunteering, and International service learning, and so those were the basis of my research of existing literature. Moving on from broad definitions, I focused on impacts that international volunteering has on volunteers and communities.

There are potential positives and negatives in both volunteer experiences and experiences of host communities. An international volunteer experience in a low income community does not equal a positive impact. In fact, there are numerous potential negatives when it comes to foreigners doing short term volunteer experiences. So many, in fact, that it caused me to question if volunteer trips should happen at all. With further research, though, I do believe mutually beneficial volunteer experiences are possible. There are many prerequisites to that happening, however. In order for experiences to be mutually beneficial, there has to be a relational focus with the sending organization and the local community in which they serve. From the very beginning, locals should be involved in the planning process. When volunteers come, they should be trained in multiple areas, have a focus on learning and collaboration, and have continuous opportunities for both interaction with locals, and reflection with their group.

I shared part of my history with cross-cultural volunteering (to give context) and then moved on to the main research questions that drove this project. My questions asked what the literature says about voluntourism, what the hosts say, and what the volunteers say. I was interested in how to improve these experiences for both hosts and volunteers. After reviewing literature and analyzing interview data, I believe that an important piece of improving experiences is for organizations to have comprehensive volunteer training. These should include relevant topics and best practices. Another important consideration is the way in which volunteer trips are facilitated. The research suggests over and over that, while having new and challenging experiences, in order for learning and perspective change to happen, there have to be opportunities for discussion. I believe trips should include daily time for debrief discussions surrounding people's experiences. Another important thing, according to interview responses in this study, is to have an organized schedule, and communicate with volunteers often. Some potential negatives I recognized were burdens on host communities as a result of big groups, and lack of understanding from volunteers, potentially leading to reinforced stereotypes. Dissecting interview answers revealed a few themes.

The two most prominent themes were, positive experiences with Aspiras, and areas for improvement in the volunteer trip. Both college volunteers and Dominican coaches and community members had overwhelmingly positive views of their relationship with Aspiras. The next most common theme was feedback from volunteers about the volunteer trip and how it could be better. Everyone shared ideas about better organization, more planning, and more communication. Volunteers also noted personal growth in areas I defined as organizational communication skills and global awareness. A main motivation and expectation for volunteers'

involvement in Aspiras was that they would help others, and the majority of them felt they were prepared for their trip.

The purpose of interviewing both volunteers and community members was to gain perspective from some of the biggest stakeholders in Aspiras. I sought this specific feedback in order to give Aspiras a body of knowledge tailored to their organization. My findings and recommendations will hopefully be a basis for creating comprehensive volunteer training content, and a stepping stone to further knowledge regarding development best practices.

### **Limitations**

The first limitation to this research is *sample size*. I had hoped to interview every coach at every soccer club, along with any community members that were there. That did not happen. Certain activities that would work in the United States simply just won't work in other countries. Even the style of interview that would be accepted in the US would not have worked in the Dominican Republic. Shortly after we arrived at our first soccer club, I asked our group leader when we could start the interviews. His response was something along the lines of, "Lindsey, dude, go for it. Just talk to people. . ." Before going through the IRB proposal process, I would have had that same mindset. But, my mind was in "rule following" mode, thinking about all the protocol I was supposed to follow. I thought I would be able to speak with people away from the activities of the soccer clubs, for at least 10 minutes each, interview script in front of me, with a translator by my side the whole time so I could transcribe everything word for word. I quickly learned that that was not possible.

All of the people I was counting on as translators were busy helping volunteers run soccer drills. Holding out a piece of paper and reading questions would have looked absurd, so

with the first coach I interviewed, I did my best to remember my most important questions, and the “interview,” was really an informal conversation on the sidelines of the soccer field. With the other people I interviewed later that day, I did have a native Spanish speaker with me so that I could get more information, but they were all still very informal. I may not have been writing everything word for word, but I was having authentic conversations with people. This style of interview led to a type of genuine conversation with locals that could not have been possible through some quantitative forms of data collection. These qualitative interviews provided depth and context for what each person said. I was listening to their hearts for children and their communities and witnessing it at the same time. Though my sample size was small, I was able to provide rich feedback to Aspiras. Answers regarding Aspiras and volunteers stayed consistent throughout all the places we visited.

When it came time to conduct interviews with college students, the issues were similar to what I experienced in the Dominican. I wanted to have in-person interviews with people, but I ended up having to send out the interview script and have it function as a survey. It is very difficult to get responses from people, but of the nine I received back, answers were consistent among volunteers. I think the survey format allowed volunteers to say more than they would have in a face-to-face interview. Another limitation of this study is my *lack of expertise in development*.

I did my best to curate best practices surrounding community development in regard to volunteering, and I do think this study gives a good broad overview of positives, negatives, and best practices. I still think it wise for Aspiras to seek advice from an expert in development, or at the very least, continue to research best practices. I think this study is a great building block to

spur further knowledge as they continue to grow their organization. The specific findings in this study from participant answers *cannot necessarily be generalized to larger populations*. Those interview scripts were tailored to Aspiras, and so the answers are limited in their versatility. However, the questions themselves, I think, are effective in gaining insight into perspectives about one's organization. I can see them being useful for other organizations outside of Aspiras. Another limitation is *lack of time*. I could have used more time to collect information for my review of literature. This study would also have been good as a longitudinal study. More information could have been gained by following participants upon returning home, to evaluate lifestyle and perspective changes in the months/years after their trip. More time in the Dominican would have given the opportunity to travel to more soccer clubs supported by Aspiras and interview more coaches and community members.

### **Future Directions**

There are many areas to expand upon in this research. Other studies of this kind would be excellent, but with a much larger scale of participants. This could be done with the primary focus on people in the communities of the soccer clubs they support. It could also be done periodically (maybe even annually), as an evaluative tool for Aspiras volunteer trips. Interview questions could be changed slightly, depending on desired insight.

To make sure that their programming is in line with development best practices, Aspiras should definitely do further research into development and seek out expert advice. It would be good for leadership to have a deeper understanding of history, inequality, causes of poverty, power imbalances, etc. It is not necessary for all volunteers to have a deep understanding in all of these topics, but leadership should be considering them when they design their programming

and decide how to train volunteers. In talking with Aspiras leadership, I discovered that they consider what they do to mostly fall under the term “voluntourism”. That being said, it would be good for leadership to stay up to date on relevant volunteer tourism information. When it comes to planning and leading a cross-cultural volunteer experience, there are some elements that are necessary to include in the preparation for and the facilitation of the trip.

### **Essential Elements of a Cross Cultural Volunteer Trip**

#### **Training.**

Volunteer training should begin at least one month prior to trip departure. I recommend weekly trainings, at least one hour long. The training should include visual elements, pictures, videos, written reflection, and group discussions. Topics to cover in volunteer training include the historical, political, and economic situation of the country in which you are serving; language training, cultural considerations (e.g. norms, do’s & don’ts), discussions about poverty, worldview, trip expectations, volunteering best practices, purpose and goals of the trip, itinerary, travel tips, and background of the areas you will visit. It is also a good idea for volunteer groups to do social activities together before departure, to build relationships and cohesiveness. This will change with each group. Maybe it is playing soccer together, or doing some other type of activity. It could also be eating a meal together, or doing some type of team-building exercise. Whatever it may be, it is good for volunteer groups to build relationships prior to going on a trip together. Having participants sign a conduct code could help improve behavior on trips, making sure everyone is in the same mindset. You might even think of having trip leaders sign as well, to promote unity in the group.

**During the volunteer trip.**

Critical reflection and discussion are key to building lasting change in perspectives. Encouraging people to journal about their experiences is a good idea. Journals help people process their experiences in a way that they may not feel comfortable doing face to face. It also gives room for thoughts and frustrations about other participants (if there are any), as well as observations about locals. Even so, journaling is not for everyone, and it is not good to force it. Some people may get journaling fatigue (Nickols, 2013). While journaling is encouraged but not essential, daily debrief and group discussions are critical. This gives an opportunity to check in with volunteers to see how they're doing. It allows for volunteers to talk about their observations and experiences throughout the day and their interactions with locals. This type of reflection leads to learning. It also gives opportunity for correction and teaching should someone have an observation that may not be accurate. Trip leaders should also be encouraging volunteers, and continuously communicating with them.

**Post Volunteer Trip.**

There should be opportunities for follow-up discussion upon returning home. If transformations did happen in volunteers during their trip, reintegration can be difficult. It is important to continue the community that was created during the shared experiences on the volunteer trip. Some researchers suggest encouraging volunteers to continue engaging in social action and research upon returning home. I recommend Aspiras continue with post trip surveys in order to get feedback and to continue improving their volunteer program.

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**Appendix A - Aspiras Letter of Approval**

aspirasfoundation.org

16 April 2018

Eric Carlo

Aspiras Foundation

Dear Lindsey,

We are looking forward to you coming to visit the Dominican Republic as part of the Aspiras volunteer group from WMU. It's exciting to hear you are devoting your thesis project to our organization. Thank you! We will be happy to set up some interviews for this May to help in your research.

We will be able to connect you with some parents and coaches at each club you visit here in the DR. There can be a Dominican with you to help translate as well. Anything to add to the research you have planned, we can help with.

Sincerely,

Eric Carlo

Co-founder

Aspiras Foundation

## Appendix B - IRB Letter

## WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Institutional Review Board

FWA00007042

IRB00000254

Date: April 26, 2018

To: Annette Hamel, Principal Investigator  
Lindsey King, Student Investigator for Honors thesis

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair 

Re: Approval not needed for HSIRB Project Number 18-04-25

This letter will serve as confirmation that your project titled "Aspiras Volunteer Guide" has been reviewed by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB). Based on that review, the WMU IRB has determined that approval is not required for you to conduct this project because you are not collecting personal identifiable (private) information about individuals and your scope of work does not meet the Federal definition of human subject.

#### 45 CFR 46.102 (f) Human Subject

(f) *Human subject* means a living individual **about whom** an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains

- (1) Data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or
- (2) Identifiable private information.

*Intervention* includes both physical procedures by which data are gathered (for example, venipuncture) and manipulations of the subject or the subject's environment that are performed for research purposes. *Interaction* includes communication or interpersonal contact between investigator and subject. *Private information* includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place, and information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual and which the individual can reasonably expect will not be made public (for example, a medical record). Private information must be individually identifiable (i.e., the identity of the subject is or may readily be ascertained by the investigator or associated with the information) in order for obtaining the information to constitute research involving human subjects.

**"About whom"** – a human subject research project requires the data received from the living individual to be about the person.

Thank you for your concerns about protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects.

A copy of your protocol and a copy of this letter will be maintained in the HSIRB files.

Office of the Vice President for Research  
Research Compliance Office  
1903 W. Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5456  
PHONE: (269) 387-8293 FAX: (269) 387-8276  
WEBSITE: [wmich.edu/research/compliance/hsirb](http://wmich.edu/research/compliance/hsirb)

CAMPUS SITE: 251 W. Walwood Hall

**Appendix C - Coach/Community Member Interview Script**

Interview Script - Dominican coaches and community members:

Tell me about your experience with Aspiras so far...

How would you say Aspiras has impacted you/your child/your community?

What do you think about volunteer groups coming to the DR/Interacting with your children?

How does your community view Aspiras groups who volunteer at clubs?

What is the impact you think they have?

What are some positives and negatives you see with volunteer groups coming?

What do you wish volunteers knew about your community?

**Appendix D - Volunteer Interview Script**

ASPIRAS POST-TRIP SURVEY

**Please feel free to share your honest thoughts! We want to hear what you have to say, both positive and negative. This will help us make future Aspiras trips even better!**

Tell me about your experience with Aspiras so far...

How would you say Aspiras has impacted you?

Tell me about your experience on the volunteer trip...

What were your expectations going into the trip?

What were some positives about the trip?

What were some negatives about the trip?

Do you feel like you were well prepared?

What are your suggestions for improvement for future trips?

What do you wish you had known before you went to the DR?