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International Service-Learning Trips: A Framework for Developing Cross-Cultural Competence

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The International Federation of Social Workers (2017) calls for social work professionals to be empowering agents who understand the context and diversity of their client populations. At the same time, research on evidence-based practice suggests that cultural immersion is one of the best ways for students to develop much-needed cultural competence and appreciation for diversity (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008). This article proposes that students would benefit more from having the opportunity to get hands-on experience in needs assessments, appreciative inquiry, program designs, implementations, and evaluations of grassroots sustainable development programs than simply being involved in charitable endeavors. Furthermore, it proposes that international exposure through well-crafted international service-learning trips can assist in the development of cross-cultural competence needed to empower individuals and communities to produce social change. International service-learning trips have great potential to help prepare students for successful careers with culturally diverse populations nationally and internationally. The educational model presented in this article stems from best practices developed during several international ser-

vice-learning trips and international study tours. Such trips and tours were based on a human rights sustainable development approach and not on a charity model. The article discusses the phases and activities recommended for the development of a successful international service-learning trip and provides recommendations for the pre-, during, and post-trip experiences.

Key words: international service-learning, cross-cultural competence, international social work, appreciation for diversity

Introduction

Currently, social workers face formidable challenges as they strive to effectively serve racially, culturally and ideologically diverse client populations. Many of these professionals are confronted on a daily basis with situations reflecting the impact of globalization, including human rights violations. Examples of such violations are cases of female genital mutilation and culturally condoned domestic violence (Hokenstad & Midgley, 1997). It is imperative for social workers to develop cross-cultural competence in order to effectively manage these challenging situations. We propose that a higher level of cultural competence may be accomplished by providing students with structured international learning opportunities.

Cultural competence has become an essential principle of social work education and practice in the United States of America. Cultural competence is emphasized in education through the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards developed and implemented by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2015), and in practice by the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2008). NASW provides additional resources for students, educators, and practitioners through the Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence (NASW, 2015). Moreover, efforts have been made by various social work programs to provide their students with international exposure opportunities that expand the social work experience beyond the local to the global arena.

Research has identified numerous benefits associated with providing students with international learning opportunities.

These include the development of cultural competence, student expertise, building confidence, promoting self-assessment, enhancing understanding of globalization and global interdependence, increasing interest in human rights and volunteer work, shaping attitudes and vision, and improving critical thinking (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). The previously identified benefits build the knowledge and skills that social workers need to engage in effective practice.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) outlines a comprehensive understanding of the purpose of the social work profession and the role of the social worker in the service delivery process. According to IFSW (2017), social workers are change agents focused on individual and community well-being, who empower local people to promote social change while understanding and appreciating the diversity present in the practice context.

This article presents a cross-cultural competence framework and shows how international exposure through the international service-learning (ISL) trips can contribute to the development of cross-cultural competence while applying a human rights-based approach to sustainable development (IFSW, 2017; Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003). It also describes the phases and activities associated with the development of successful ISL trips and study tours. The model presented in this article is the result of longitudinal inquiry and observations made during international service-learning trips to Thailand, Namibia and Haiti, and international study tours in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. Based on these experiences, the authors propose that ISL trips have great potential to help effectively prepare social work students for international careers and effective practice in culturally diverse contexts.

Cross-Cultural Competence

According to the NASW Code of Ethics, the social worker's ethical responsibility to clients includes the development of cultural competence. Ethical standard 1.05 (b) Cultural Competence and Social Diversity Standard, point (b), reads as follows:

Social workers should have a knowledge base of their client's cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the

provision of services that are sensitive to clients' cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups. (NASW, 2008, p. 6)

It is important to define cultural competence as understood by the social work profession, given that it is part of the social work value base. Therefore, cultural competence is defined as:

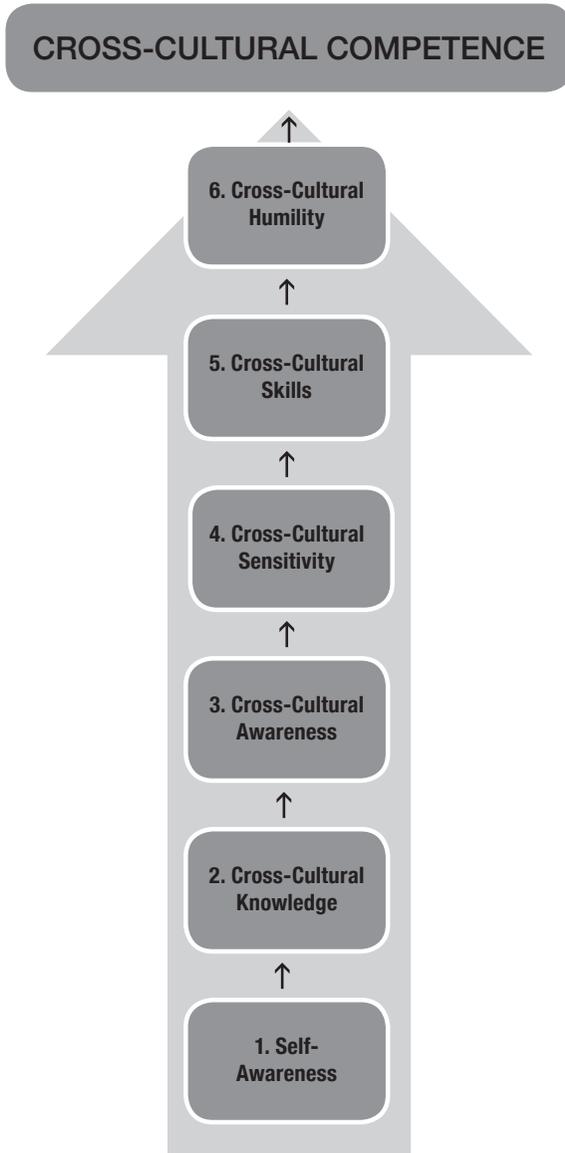
the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all culture, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each. (NASW, 2015, p. 13)

Fong (2004), Fong & Furuto (2001), and Lum (2012) concur. According to them, cultural competence is developed through an ongoing process of knowledge acquisition, skill development, and the evaluation of social work practice within the context of professional social work values. Furthermore, cultural competence is necessary to enable individuals to create long-term changes in their contextual communities. Before achieving cultural competence, social work students must take several steps. These steps are presented in the Diaconu's Cultural Competency Framework (Figure 1). The elements of the proposed framework are usually an integral part of successful international learning trips. These include: self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, cross-cultural awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural skills, and cross-cultural humility. This proposed framework should foster cultural growth and cross cultural competence. Grusky (2000) warns that, "without thoughtful preparation, orientation, program development and the encouragement for study, and critical analysis and reflection, the programs can become small theaters that recreate historic cultural misunderstanding and simplistic stereotypes" (p. 858).

Steps to Cross-Cultural Competence Development

The following steps are proposed to help counter personal and societal stereotypes and promote culturally competent practice.

Figure 1. Diaconu’s Cross-Cultural Competence Framework



Self-Awareness

Development of cross-cultural competence cannot begin without self-awareness. Competent professionals must have

a working knowledge and appreciation of their own cultural identity, values and biases, as well as an understanding of how power and privilege manifest in their professional lives. This knowledge will help them advocate on behalf of clients and help such clients in their journey to personal and collective well-being (NASW, 2015).

Cross-Cultural Knowledge

The second step proposed in this model is the increase of cross-cultural knowledge. This step requires individuals to develop a personal knowledge base that includes the cultural characteristics, family systems, values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and the history of other ethnic groups (Adams, 1995). This knowledge base can include “race and ethnicity; immigration and refugee status; tribal groups; religion and spirituality; sexual orientation; gender identity or expression, social class; and mental or physical abilities of various cultural groups” (NASW, 2015, p. 4). Students should gain cross-cultural knowledge on a daily basis through independent learning, individual interactions with people from other ethnic groups, and through the explicit and implicit curricula of their social work educational programs.

Cross-Cultural Awareness

The proposed third step to the development of cultural cross-competence is building cross-cultural awareness. This step may require a paradigm shift for the understanding of the personal attitudes and values of other ethnic groups. It also requires increased understanding, acceptance, and openness in our relation to others (Adams, 1995). The concept of cross-cultural awareness is built on self-awareness and cross-cultural knowledge.

Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

The proposed fourth step to cross-cultural competence is developing cultural sensitivity. This step builds on the three previous steps and asserts that no culture is better than another, in spite of cultural differences or similarities. Therefore, we should not assign intrinsic value to observed cultural differences. At

this stage, students should be able to see how cross-cultural sensitivity can positively influence the outcomes of the helping process.

Cross-Cultural Skills

The proposed fifth step to cross-cultural competence is the development of cross-cultural skills. Social work practitioners are professionally mandated to understand and respect the role that culture plays in the psychosocial development of individuals and their families. Furthermore, through the knowledge building process that it is based on evidence-based practice, social workers should develop the necessary skills to competently assist their clients (NASW, 2015). The cross-cultural skills employed by social workers, as agents of social change, should build on the cultural knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity developed in the previous steps. These skills include the ability to:

- Successfully manage constant change
- Be sensitive to the cultural needs of others
- Successfully navigate a multi-cultural work and volunteer environment
- Adapt to time delays while still focused on the task-at-hand and deadlines
- Keep an open mind to environments displaying diverse values, norms, and cultural mores, and,
- Thrive in cross-cultural settings (NASW, 2015).

Cross-Cultural Humility

The sixth and the final proposed step to cross-cultural competence is the development of cross-cultural humility. This requires making “a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to readdressing the power imbalances (...) and to developing mutually beneficial and nonpaternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on

behalf of individuals and defined populations" (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 117).

Cross-cultural humility requires an understanding and appreciation of one's own culture in a harmonious relationship with other cultures that promotes a selfless desire for social justice for the benefit of all (Rawls, 1971). Cultural humility also recognizes the central expertise of the client and the worker's recognition of his/her lack of knowledge of someone else's culture needed to make value judgments (Hohman, 2013; Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013). During international service-learning trips, students are expected to approach the client situation with respect, humility, and a personal awareness of their own limitations. It can be argued that true collaboration and client empowerment happens only when allowing the client to be the true expert of his own cultural reality. Without cultural humility, international service-learning trips will not be able to promote true cultural competence.

The cross-cultural competence model presented in this article does not suggest that an outsider can become an expert on someone else's culture by following the proposed steps. Instead, it proposes that the model can help significantly increase one's level of cross-cultural competence. The levels of cultural competence that can be attained through the implementation of this model are: (a) pre-competence—the understanding that there is still work to be done; (b) competence—the comprehension that there is a need for continual personal assessment of knowledge and attitudes; and (c) proficiency—the readiness to contribute to the knowledge base. (Adams, 1995; Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989).

Student International Exposure

In a context of globalization and increased population movement across national geographical boundaries, helping professionals are becoming increasingly aware that they must attain excellence in cultural competence (Harper-Dorton & Lantz, 2007, p. xi). Cultural immersion is considered one of the best ways for social work students to develop cultural sensitivity and the appreciation of other cultures necessary to fulfill the profession's purpose in the 21st century (Anderson et al., 2006; Pence & McGilivray, 2008). Additional benefits of cultural immersion include:

building student confidence; promoting self-assessment; increasing understanding of globalization and global interdependence; increasing interest in humanitarian efforts and volunteer work; shaping attitudes and vision; improving critical thinking; and helping students understand and appreciate their own culture (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Sutton & Rubin, 2004). Furthermore, travel abroad also contributes to the development of students' cognitive and affective functioning (Wolfer, 1990). As a result, an increasing number of academic disciplines and professions are relying on international travel to help their students build cross-cultural competence.

There are numerous ways of providing cultural immersion experiences. These include international study tours, international internships, study abroad programs, summer semesters abroad, and service-learning trips. It is estimated that approximately 250,000 college students in the United States participate in some form of international experience each year (Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2010). International field placements and semesters abroad provide students with more time for cultural immersion and skills development. Barriers preventing many students from participating in international educational experiences include lack of time, family or personal issues, financial burdens or responsibilities, academic needs and/or school-mandated course sequencing (Nagy & Falk, 2000). Content-driven study tours provide another option for cultural immersion. These are considered fairly limiting in their nature and scope, and may be perceived as more "touristy" and narrow in content. In our view, international service-learning (ISL) trips are the preferred choice to provide students with significant cultural immersion experiences, given their relative short-term and applied nature.

International Service-Learning Trips

International service-learning (ISL) trips are faculty-led, relatively short-term, overseas intensive trips. From the authors' perspective, ISL trips work best when they last from three to eight weeks. These trips enable us to expose students to a broad range of cultures, social contexts and geographic locations while maintaining a focus on organized service. ISL trips are organized in partnership with local organizations and are fully embedded in their local contexts. Service activities are designed

to address specific local community or institutional needs, with a strong emphasis on empowerment consistent with a human rights and sustainable development approach (Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003). This type of international exposure provides students with opportunities for cultural immersion, hands-on involvement, agency or community support and cooperation, and personal and professional reflection (Anderson et al., 2006; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008). In contrast to study tours, ISL trips lead to academic credit and are focused primarily on service learning. For this reason, learning must be documented before academic credit can be awarded to students. The rigorous learning objectives and expectations attached to the ISL trips (e.g., course content informed service) make this type of international experience empowering and developmental in nature. The ISL developmental nature sharply contrast with the charitable model of volunteer tourism or volunteerism.

Charity versus Human Rights Approach to Social Development

Clear and measurable learning outcomes are key to ISL trips. Learning experiences must seek an understanding of local realities to enable students to go beyond charity and realize the need to empower individuals, groups, or communities to create and implement needed changes. This focus is crucial to the proposed cross-cultural learning experience. The charitable model approach relies mostly on volunteerism. It sees local problems as requiring outside expert assistance provided by moral individuals, who sacrifice their time, efforts, and finances to provide assistance to people in need (Boesen & Martin, 2007). The charitable model requires the development of partnerships between helpers and clients to follow a series of expert recommended or mandated activities to solve problems. In spite of the merits of this approach, experts recognize the value of the local client or community knowledge base in the pursuit of sustainable change. As a result, a new model of development was proposed during the last decade. As part of the movement away from the charity model, experts looked at sustainability as an important aspect of development. The resulting model does not see clients as victims. Cultural humility plays a prominent role in this model, given that it sees the client as an expert that simply needs to learn different skills to solve his/her problems. The

model proposes that our inalienable human rights must be the basis for a true understanding of human problems and their solutions, regardless of the context (Boesen & Martin, 2007; EQUITAS, 2014). For these reasons, successful international service-learning trips rely on a human rights and sustainable development approach.

Phases of Successful International Service-Learning Trips

We propose the following phases and activities of successful ISL trips based on experiences of the main author during several ISL trips and international study tours.

Pre-travel phase. Some of the pre-travel activities required for the development of successful ISL trips include: (1) *Thematic Identification*—On what population and/or issue will the trip service activities focus? (2) *Geographical Location Identification*—Where does the population of interest reside or where is the problem taking place (e.g. continent, country, region within a country, city/village)? (3) *Security Assessment*—Is the identified destination safe for students and faculty to live and work in? An important planning component is the on-going monitoring of the site travel.state.gov for up-to-date international travel alerts and warnings. (4) *In-country Partner Identification*—What community, institution, organization, or agency would be the best partner/s to accomplish the goals of the ISL trip? Universities and colleges could partner with entities such as: local governmental or nongovernmental organizations engaged in community development work, local governmental or nongovernmental human service agencies, national-level not-for-profit voluntary agencies (e.g., World Vision, Save the Children, Catholic Relief, CARE, ADRA), U.S.-based organizations in foreign countries (e.g., Peace Corps), U.S. governmental organizations (e.g., United States Agency for International Development), and other international organizations (e.g., the UN organizations). (5) *Collaboration/Reciprocity Agreement/s*—Are there agreements already in place between the college/university and the in-country partner containing clear guidelines, expectations, and responsibilities (e.g., MOUs, partnership agreements)? If not, these documents need to be drafted and signed by all parties involved before the trip begins. The home institution's legal team should take a close look at these documents before signing them. (6) *Program*

Development—What programs/projects and/or service-learning activities would be required for completion of the course? This must be decided in close collaboration with the in-country partner entity while following a human rights-based, sustainable development model. (7) *Curriculum Development*—What will be the academic content and theoretical framework of the proposed course? What will be the in-country service-learning activities? What competencies and practice behaviors will be covered in the course? (8) *Trip Schedule and Itinerary Development*—Given its relatively short-term nature, what would be the best time for the ISL trip to take place (e.g., winter, spring, or summer break)? What would be the optimal timeframe for the trip (a minimum of three weeks; a maximum of eight weeks)? We should prepare for unexpected circumstances and contingencies when developing the itinerary for the ISL trip by developing a Plan A, Plan B, Plan C, and so on.

The pre-travel phase should also include: (9) *Enrollment Targets*—This is determined by contextual issues, the trip's characteristics and the project's capacity. (e.g., housing capacity, available transportation, and number of leading faculty). (10) *Budget Development*—work with the in-country partner on identifying in-country vendors and best prices for international and local airfare prices; in-country room and board; in-country transportation, etc. (11) *Faculty Expertise*—Does the principal faculty leader have the necessary expertise to lead the trip, including knowledge of the academic content, travel abroad experience, and any necessary language proficiency? If elements of the required expertise are missing, the leading faculty member can either partner with another faculty member, identify an in-country expert/consultant who could complement his/her expertise, or fill any knowledge gaps before the trip takes place. (12) *Institutional Procedures*—Make sure the trip takes place in accordance with the home-institution's policies and procedures. Investigate and follow all institutional guidelines applicable to ISL trips (e.g., prepare and submit needed applications and other required documents). This includes following all institutional risk management guidelines. (13) *Student Recruitment*—Identify and disseminate the participants' inclusion and exclusion criteria (e.g., age, degree or area of specialized study, academic level). Identify the most appropriate marketing

strategies to reach the targeted population (e.g., social media, posters, flyers, emails, advising meetings). (14) *Informal Student Orientation*—Meet with interested students to clarify the trip's purpose, goals, and expectations; go over the trip's schedule and financial information; and provide them with information regarding course registration.

The final steps in the pre-travel phase include: (15) *Finalize ISL Trip Logistics*—Upon students' registration, purchase airfare tickets, pay for the hotel reservations (in many countries, hotels require pre-payment for the reserved rooms), purchase international travel insurance for all participants, etc. (16) *Formal Student Preparation*—Before departing, registered students should participate in a series of face-to-face seminars, presentations, and/or lectures. The lead faculty member should meet with students as often as necessary, depending on the nature and time-frame of the trip. Options include weekly meetings for an entire semester before the trip, or daily face-to-face interactions for ten to fourteen days before departure. Topics to be addressed must include, but are not limited to: local history, language, regional and local cultural mores and practices, in-country organizational norms, body language and verbal cues, dress code, regional and local idioms, flexibility and adaptability, non-judgmental attitudes (do's and don'ts), confidentiality, and in-country safety and security tips. Students may be required to read recommended books and articles and to view video materials.

During pre-departure meetings, whenever possible natives of the proposed host country should be invited to share personal experiences and to answer students' questions. The lead faculty member may consider the use of a cross-cultural self-awareness instrument. Test results should be processed and discussed with students. Lastly, a directed written assignment should be submitted before departure. The assignment should focus on the content covered during the pre-travel face-to-face interactions and on students' trip expectations. Assignments should revolve around the first three steps of the cross-cultural competence framework (Figure 1): self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, and cross-cultural awareness. Assignments should have clear descriptions, expectations, and grading rubrics. The last step in the pre-departure preparations is (18) *State Department Registration*—Register the ISL trip participants with

the State Department and with the US Embassy/Consulate in the host country.

In-country phase. The activities suggested during this phase include, but are not limited to: (1) *Safety and Security*—Immediately upon arrival, the ISL trip leader should get in touch with the United States Embassy/Consulate in that country and introduce the group to the local authorities and other leaders, when appropriate. At all times, the participants should be aware of their immediate physical surroundings, they should keep an eye on the political developments in the host country, and they should adopt neutral views on national, regional, ethnic, organizational, local, or personal disputes. (2) *In-Country Logistic Auditing*—Upon arrival, the ISL trip leader should contact the partnering entities and all the vendors providing services, such as transportation providers, to make sure that these vendors are still in business, that the contracted services are still available, and that the prices for services and goods did not change (potentially due to higher gas prices, higher national or local inflation, etc.). (3) *Cultural Information Review*—Before starting the service-learning activities, a native facilitator from the in-country partnering entity or a cultural anthropologist from the local university/college should be invited to provide a review of the cultural information presented during the pre-travel phase, and to further clarify any remaining ambiguities and misconceptions. (4) *Service-learning Activities*—These are primarily the hands-on activities designed to encourage students to “work with local organizations to serve the community where they are staying, engage in cultural exchange, and learn about a daily reality very different from their own” (Grusky, 2000, p. 859). (5) *Tourist Activities*—In addition to the service-learning activities, evening and/or weekend tourist activities should be integrated into the ISL trip’s schedule. These activities should offer opportunities for learning about regional or local cultural mores, provide morale boosters, serve as opportunities for relaxing and decompressing. (6) *Informational and Devotional Meetings*—Every morning an informational meeting should take place in order to clarify the daily tasks and expectations, changes in schedule, etc. A short devotional could take place either before or after the informational meeting if the group is composed of faith-based social work students. (7) *Debriefings*—At the end of each

workday, faculty members and students should meet to discuss the activities of the day; share thoughts, feelings and personal experiences; and explore the highs and lows of the day. These moments of debriefing should further clarify the purpose of the trip, solidify the learning objectives, and help cement cultural competence principles among students. (8) *Monitoring and Evaluation*—All in-country activities should be monitored and evaluated on a consistent basis by the ISL trip leader. This will allow for timely interventions when issues arise or when circumstances change. (9) *Feedback and Guidance*—Feedback and guidance should be provided to the students and to the in-country partner entities on a consistent basis or as needed.

The activities presented in the in-country phase are divided in three major categories: (1) *Investigative*—During the service-learning trip, students are expected to engage in investigative activities that enable them to study the course topics or issues (e.g., experiential research activities and papers, agency/community presentations). (2) *Applied*—Students are expected to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom to real life situations. (3) *Reflective*—Students are expected to engage in reflective activities such as debriefing and personal journaling at the end of each day.

During the in-country phase, students should focus on the last two steps of the proposed cross-cultural competence model (Figure 1): the development and application of cross-cultural skills and cultural humility.

Post-travel phase. Post-trip activities include, but may not be limited to: (1) *Critical Assessment and Analysis*—Upon their return, students should be provided with face-to-face interaction/s, written assignments, and/or video diaries to help them synthesize and analyze the acquired knowledge. (2) *Practical Applications*—Students should identify applications and implications of their learning. More specifically, they should reflect on the relevant applications of the acquired knowledge for their professional skills. They should also identify key applications of their learning for the classroom, their degree programs, internships, communities, and/or work settings.

The presented ISL trip stages and activities are not meant to be prescriptive, but rather they reflect the personal observations and experience gained after years of organizing international

service-learning trips and study tours. The stages and activities presented in this article should be adapted to fit the unique needs and contexts of each individual ISL trip.

Conclusion

According to Nagy and Falk (2000), the global village in which we now live and global interdependence are growing by leaps and bounds. Stein (1965) stated half a century ago that “we neglect our responsibility in social work education when we do not provide a world view to our students, and we neglect our responsibility to our profession and our government when we do not contribute to international service” (p. 55). If these words were true more than fifty years ago, they are even more important for educators and practitioners today, given the shift from charity to a human rights and sustainable development approach (Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003). In conclusion, ISL trips help students and faculty members see social work in action through empowerment and sustainable social change. These trips also give them the opportunity to contextualize social work practice. Benefits associated with ISL trips include development of cross-cultural competence, learning about global issues, international exposure, the opportunity to apply internationally acquired knowledge to domestic, cultural, social, and political issues, and the opportunity to contribute our own professional experiences and expertise to global issues (Healy, 1990). Schools of social work are encouraged to infuse international content into their curricula and to support international service-learning trips, organized content-driven study tours, international field placements and study abroad experiences. The authors consider international service-learning (ISL) trips to be the most comprehensive of all these. These trips create an intricate canvas where students can apply academic knowledge and theoretical concepts to community service projects with the dual purpose of learning and helping others (Crabtree, 2008).

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