

Service-Learning at Catholic Universities

Challenges and Opportunities

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Students participate in a variety of service-learning programs and experiences during their time of studies. The authors explore the issues and challenges of this important avenue for educating and forming students with a sense of global citizenship and Christian discipleship.

When Kaitlin, a Notre Dame undergraduate, returned from her summer service, she sat down for an interview. The stoic demeanor with which she began quickly unraveled, and soon she sobbed. Recalling a visit to a traumatized village in Uganda's war-ravaged north, Kaitlin mumbled, "They only wanted me to help them bury their dead—that's all." She faced the feeling of utter incompetence facing incomprehensible evil.

Kaitlin's humbling new awareness came due to the International Summer Service Learning Program (ISSLP), one of many programs in service-learning that have proliferated at Notre Dame and elsewhere. Sometimes called experiential or community-based learning (Bolan), service-learning (SL) refers to pedagogy that

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self-consciously employs firsthand experiences of the subject matter being studied, creating immersive encounters with pressing social issues as students engage in organized service. Opportunities for SL take many forms—regular academic courses with a service expectation that investigate challenges facing local communities; shorter, issue-oriented explorations of themes like peacebuilding or Catholic teaching on life issues; trips to distinctive cultural settings like Native American reservations, Latino communities, or urban neighborhoods; weeklong visits during mid-semester breaks to needy areas for short-term tasks; summer-long service within the United States; and finally the ambitious ISSLP, which sends students to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Whatever form it takes, its advocates claim that SL allows students a richer learning than text-based, traditional classroom pedagogy, thus improving education while addressing community needs (Eyler and Giles; Astin).

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This article will explore the potential of SL in the faith formation and broader education of our students, reflecting especially on our experiences in the ISSLP. Three challenges situate what we will say. First, many incoming university students have already had rich experiences in SL, usually through their schools or churches. They arrive on campus carrying a sense of obligation to their communities and are poised for more intensive service-learning. Campus ministry programs and other units in universities need to learn to respond adequately.

The second challenge lies in integrating SL in a university's larger educational purpose. SL at Notre Dame aspires to fulfill one goal in the university's mission statement, namely to help students "cultivate a disciplined sensibility to the poverty, injustice, and oppression that burden the lives of so many." The statement adds, "The aim is to create a sense of human solidarity and concern for the common good that will bear fruit as learning becomes service to justice" (www.nd.edu/aboutnd/mission-statement). Given this goal, SL advocates here (and no doubt elsewhere) aspire to full participation in a university's curricular programs. Yet at the same time, as Kaitlin's story suggests, SL, especially under religious auspices, often encourages students to engage deeper life questions—for many students, faith questions. Such questions obviously resemble those that Catholic campus ministers seek to raise in their efforts to enhance the faith of their students. At Notre Dame and some other universities, campus ministry is a separate entity from the places

like the Center for Social Concerns (hereafter, "the Center"), which sponsors most service-learning on our campus. Given this administrative arrangement, we struggle to integrate the Center's programs within both the curricular undertakings of the university and Notre Dame's pastoral concerns embodied in campus ministry. Our struggles likely replicate those faced by other campus ministers who would try to integrate the service opportunities they foster in the broader education of their students.

A third challenge for us is that SL at Catholic universities takes place alongside a sometimes contentious conversation about the place of faith commitments and ecclesial identity in U.S. Catholic higher education (Gallin; Morey and Piderit). Of course SL takes place outside faith-based universities and considerable literature in the field presumes secular assumptions, some of them overlapping with Catholic perspectives. Yet Catholics have views on theological topics like mission with their own logics and expectations. Negotiating secular and faith-based expectations presumed by SL at contemporary Catholic universities thus is not always easy. Catholic campus ministers likely face similar challenges, as the service they offer students overlaps with other university-based service opportunities.

We have not overcome these challenges. In addition, other universities have impressive credentials and long wisdom in SL, and our experiences may not translate well to other places. But recognizing that SL is an important and vexed issue on our campus, here we consider our experiences in light of our situation, thereby contributing to an ongoing conversation about SL and the formation of students through campus ministry and similar undertakings. We believe that Catholic universities and campus ministers in non-Catholic universities should enhance the service-learning they offer, strive to integrate service-learning across the curriculum, and turn to contemporary theological reflection on Christian mission as they do so. Our students' education and the church will be enriched by improving service-learning at Catholic universities and elsewhere.

After describing the work of the Center for Social Concerns and the ISSLP we will consider ongoing challenges facing SL in Catholic universities and campus ministry centers.

Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns

There is synergy and overlap between the Center and campus ministry at Notre Dame, which is a separate unit organizing faith instruction, liturgical practice, and retreats. Both seek to foster mature spiritual formation throughout the university community. Both emphasize distinctively Catholic perspectives in most of their activities, though they also offer less specified programming to include others. Thus the Center emphasizes Catholic social teaching and draws upon Catholic

theological resources to appropriate service within the maturing faith of students but also addresses issues of justice and spirituality from other perspectives.

Since its inception in 1983, the Center for Social Concerns has organized service opportunities for students and facilitated service-learning, community-based learning, and community-based research. The Center also offers non-course-based resources, including advising graduating seniors about their future, providing student leadership development, and sponsoring public events. With a full-time staff of twenty, twelve of whom have advanced degrees including four with doctorates, the Center undertakes a wide range of activities that engage the university community (www.centerforsocialconcerns.nd.edu).

Three-credit, community-based-learning (CBL) courses, taught by university faculty often with members of the Center's staff, resemble traditional classroom courses except that students spend some hours in service, providing "the living text" for fuller comprehension of course material. CBL courses take place in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, theology, economics and policy studies, and biology. The Center also works with faculty who wish to employ SL- or CBL-based methodologies in new course development or course revision.

CBL courses receive regular letter grades and depend on faculty availability. Most of the Center's signature SL courses—like the ISSLP—occur regularly and are graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory (S/U). Most are theology courses, though often cross-listed elsewhere. These include one-credit courses over the short breaks, a three-credit, domestic, summer service-learning program (SSLP), and the four-credit ISSLP. Such courses generally follow a similar pattern: required orientation, the service-learning component itself, reading and writing assignments, a final integrative paper, and required follow-up.

Like the ISSLP, the SSLP is organized as a "bookend" course, so that formal class time occurs in the semesters before and after the summer service. The ISSLP, which both of us have been involved with, involves fewer students, but its site locations and extensive preparation distinguish it from other Center programs.

The International Summer Service Learning Program

The ISSLP sends forty students in pairs to eight- to ten-week service-learning placements with twenty-four partner organizations across fifteen countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Students work with international nongovernmental organizations—many of them faith-based organizations like Catholic Relief Services—or religious or mission-sending communities like the Congregation of Holy Cross or Maryknoll. These partnerships allow students to serve and learn in contexts including health care, education, capacity building, advocacy, and increasingly through program evaluation and community-based research.

ISSLP Structure

The ISSLP includes two integrated theology courses—a one-credit, spring-semester International Issues Seminar and a fall-term, three-credit course comprising the service component itself and follow-up.

The spring seminar was designed by the ISSLP director and meets weekly for two hours. Most classes are led by university faculty who come as guest lecturers to introduce students to issues in the developing world: human rights, global health, immigration and migration, global poverty and the U.N. millennium development goals, and international dimensions to Catholic social teaching. Students prepare for weekly sessions with readings and a short written assignment, some relating the topic to their upcoming host country. Such area-specific preparations sharpen students' understanding of their destinations. The course also provides other assistance: tools for cross-cultural living; logistical guidelines for international study and travel; practical advice related to gender, health, and safety abroad; and support within a collegial community.

A weekend retreat focuses on cross-cultural sensitivity and also teaches spiritual appropriation of students' experience into their faith lives. The retreat represents a pivotal community-building opportunity and chance for focused reflection away from campus as students prepare their minds, hearts, and spirits for the summer. An evening session frames the weekend with theological reflections on the frontier-crossing journey ahead, drawing on the work of theologians like John Dunne (1972) and Anthony Gittins (1993). The evening's reflective and introspective tone continues as students depict their own life's journeys thus far.

Friday evening prepares for Saturday, which begins with a cross-cultural simulation activity. Follow-up discussion with a social anthropologist then leads into panel sessions featuring past ISSLP students. Topics addressed include intercultural communication and culture shock, practical issues of living abroad, as well as reverse culture shock and other reentry issues. The retreat ends with a Eucharist and commissioning.

After the summer, students complete evaluation forms, select journal excerpts for submission and evaluation, and finalize their integrative papers. They also participate in a reentry retreat and other sessions focusing on continued integration of their summer experiences and a debriefing with the director. Some pursue more individualized assistance with reentry issues. Returnees finally give a public presentation on their ISSLP.

ISSLP Rationale

Compared to traditional classrooms, service-learning like the ISSLP seeks to provide a more dialectical model of knowledge gained, created, and shared. SL, we believe, encourages students to tackle the issues and frame the debates "at the level of complexity they require" (Chickering, 1). Real-life encounters with social problems aim to create the experience of displacement so that as students grow

in appreciation of the complexities of such problems, they also develop faith-filled self-awareness (McNeill, Morrison, and Nouwen). Done well, SL thus has the power to link enhanced civic responsibility and commitment to the common good with students' faith development.

The ISSLP was developed to challenge students with domestic service-learning experience to examine poverty and injustice around the world with the best theological and critical tools available. Its extensive preparation, interdisciplinary approach, and especially the international partnerships make the ISSLP the most ambitious SL program at Notre Dame. It pursues three goals, providing students: (1) understanding of poverty in the developing world, (2) awareness of international social issues in light of Catholic social teaching, and (3) cross-cultural competen-

cies. The ISSLP also helps students do theological reflection with their experiences, or do "local theology" (Sedmak). As they grow in critical awareness of global issues, we hope students will deepen their participation in the Body of Christ by fuller solidarity with the suffering, and act accordingly.

In our experience, their physical ISSLP journeys often place students emotionally and spiritually into the heart of dramas reflective of the global human condition, thus prompting or enhancing a transformative intellectual and spiritual process. We presume that the greater displacement involved in traveling to another country and culture, linked with organized service-learning that benefits communities, can facilitate greater global awareness and encourage fuller conversion of mind, heart, and habits. For some students a faith-filled awakening is more likely abroad. The inequalities can be more glaring and the self-questioning deeper.

Inequality and difference can raise unsettling questions. Living with a host family who can afford to pay the \$150 school fee for only one of their six children, students question their several plasma-screen TVs. Living among Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist populations, they face issues of religious diversity and plurality and question their own (usually Catholic) faith. Faced with the decaying bones of village members and asked for a coffin, they can come unraveled, as Kaitlin did.

As grueling as this can be, we are convinced that good things come when students ask the right questions, raise perceptive "what ifs," and especially if they

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demand "No longer!" We have seen students reorient their lives to address great questions of global justice as they hold in their memories and hearts their newfound relationships. When this happens, as SL research attests, we feel we have assisted in students' academic, moral, spiritual, and civic development.

Ongoing Issues

The ISSLP boasted a seven-to-one ratio of applicants to positions available this year, a ratio growing steadily since the program's 1998 inception. This interest testifies to the broad acknowledgment of the program's success. Still we recognize areas of ongoing concern, to be discussed here under three headings. First, international SL programs face numerous practical difficulties. Second, tensions arise when the ISSLP and other SL courses seek a place within the university curriculum. Finally, the theological perspectives operative in SL at Catholic universities sit uncomfortably with SL literature and also challenge student preconceptions.

Practical challenges

Organizing international SL demands a great deal of work from faculty, staff, and community partners. For example, the development and maintenance of ISSLP partner-sites requires substantial logistical awareness and ongoing attentiveness. We select partnerships on perceptions of greatest potential for long-term compatibility, something not always easy to assess. Besides the service they provide to meet the needs of the poor in their communities, other factors considered include their location, reputation, prior experience with volunteers or interns, capacities to accompany and mentor students, openness to learn about the community's role in SL, and overall synergy with the ISSLP. Most essential is an organization's ability to articulate its own needs and identify how students can embrace its mission in one summer. Staff capacity, options for housing, and issues of safety and transportation also determine whether to partner with an organization. Predictably, the suitability of partners changes over time and depends on the individuals present. Reassessment is a constant need.

The demands of monitoring sites go beyond the cooperating partners. Circumstances in ISSLP destinations can also change rapidly, forcing adjustments. Some years ago conflict with Pakistan led to shifting India-bound students to Thailand, as did election unrest in Cambodia another year. Due diligence to minimize the risks in international SL placements, housing, and transportation can involve measures of accountability such as safety audits; legal waivers, contracts, and agreements; health, travel, and evacuation insurance; evacuation plans and procedures; and detailed communication protocols.

The legal terrain associated with international undergraduate travel also requires attention, for liability issues can disallow certain otherwise appropriate destinations. Safety is of course a concern, but some decisions about risk avoidance in typical ISSLP destinations smack of arbitrary or prejudicial judgment. United States State Department travel warnings are rarely issued for European nations even when terrorism strikes (as in London and Madrid), but Kenya, the Philippines, and Haiti have been subject to years of prolonged travel warnings. These restrict undergraduate students from university-sponsored travel to those countries, at least at Notre Dame.

As the opening anecdote of this article suggests, assisting students after the ISSLP can be demanding. Equipped with newfound perspectives, returnees often report feeling isolated and marginalized, outsiders within a once familiar culture and community. Awareness of global inequalities and perceptions of U.S. indifference or malfeasance can generate critical perspectives that alienate family and friends.

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It behooves faculty and practitioners to recognize and understand the potential enormity of the dissonance and the complexity of the journey once the students are "home." The burden of responsibility rests upon international SL programs to provide assistance in the reentry process: to help students make sense of their experience, give them skills for sharing their newfound perspectives, and to help them to integrate their experience into their life's journey and vocation.

In its early years the ISSLP did not adequately address such concerns. As reentry alienation resurfaced, the program has been restructured to better address reentry. Returning is part of the students' work of redefining and appropriating their values and acting on them with integrity and grace. It is a central part of the ISSLP, not only its aftermath.

The scope of ISSLP participants is another challenge. Because there are many applicants, unfortunately we must turn away many students who wish to participate. In order to make the ISSLP accessible for students regardless of economic status, the Center provides air travel, room and board, and also currently offers \$1,100 to cover vaccinations and other travel expenses. This does not replace summer employment income but is intended to encourage applicants from among those relying on summer income for tuition or living expenses. International students face additional difficulties due to complexities with visas into the United States after the ISSLP and thus their participation is limited.

Curricular Challenges

In academic settings where research demands on faculty intensify, courses featuring service- and community-based learning have been accused of lacking academic rigor. Yet even though SL may mean fewer direct contact hours with faculty, those familiar with it rebut such accusations with evidence showing higher student engagement and better results than in traditional classes (Eyler and Giles; Kiely). Our experience supports that research. Faculty report enhanced academic learning and more dynamic classrooms as theory faces testing from multiple perspectives and real-life situations. In addition, faculty find their teaching more interesting when SL models are incorporated. Their research often takes on a broader, more interdisciplinary approach.

Perceptions of lessened academic rigor are only reinforced by the practice that our signature courses, including the ISSLP, are graded S/U rather than normally. Along with others, we debate the merit of grades in motivating and evaluating learning, but courses with letter grades usually carry more weight and often fulfill requirements that S/U courses do not. Some of our courses fulfill disciplinary requirements for majors and minors. But the place of grades in the assessment of the Center's signature courses remains an unresolved issue. The mantra of the SL field regarding assessment is "grade the learning and not the service," a reasonable guideline. But the ISSLP's diverse settings complicate any such easy assessments of learning.

Assessment in the ISSLP takes several forms besides the S/U designation. First, students share evolving learning goals through a series of online surveys, allowing a comparison among a pre-ISSLP orientation survey, predeparture survey, post-summer survey, post-reentry survey, and others in years following. Students are also assessed through writing assignments during the spring seminar, in the summer while on site, and through the final integrative paper. Individual debriefing sessions with the director are another, less formal form of assessment. We continue to search for better measures of the educative value of programs like the ISSLP.

Theological Challenges

While programs like the ISSLP take students far from their homes for service-learning largely in faith-based organizations, there is also reluctance among our students to consider their service as Christian mission. They often view mission as proselytism without sensitivity to cultural difference. Even the widespread growth of short-term missions has not overcome an aversion to mission.

Our students mirror a similar allergy to mission language in broader SL literature, which eschews it to avoid overlaying this pedagogical methodology with confessional connotations. While this avoidance is understandable within the secular demands of U.S. higher education, such strong distinctions and strict avoidance have dangerous implications for Catholic universities and campus ministry programs that have good reasons to embrace notions of mission.

Importantly, in Christian theological reflection the term “mission” has come to include a variety of practices, many of them consistent with secularized SL presumptions. Moreover, the best of contemporary theology of mission has moved beyond previous notions of mission as defined only by proselytism and distanced itself from colonialist mindsets (Bevans and Schroeder). For these reasons, missiological thought represents a fruitful resource for the kind of education undertaken by SL at Catholic universities and under the auspices of campus ministry.

But the ISSLP faces challenges in this regard. Relations between U.S. universities and nongovernmental organizations can easily fall prey to paternalism and resentment reminiscent of some past missionary practice. More important, our students clearly embrace certain aspects now included under the umbrella term

“mission” better than others. Work for poverty alleviation, for instance, raises fewer hackles in them than evangelization of a more traditional sort. They tend to accept that the church’s missionary task stands or falls on its solidarity with the world’s marginalized and are wary of publicly proclaiming Jesus.

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Given these presuppositions, we see our task at several levels. First, the ISSLP offers awareness of the world and its problems. We provide a variety of tools, some theological, to make sense of those difficulties. Second, we invite them to do theological reflection on their experiences. Understandably such practices appeal to some more than others, and faith is not an ISSLP requirement. Third, we invite believers to allow their

experiences to shape that faith in determinative ways.

Despite our efforts, difficulties remain with helping our students understand mission as a fundamental baptismal call they pursue in the ISSLP. Similar challenges no doubt arise in campus ministry settings where SL is pursued. Our students easily equate “good” mission with “service” and “bad” mission with proselytizing. We ask ourselves, if our students see their service as linked to their baptismal commitment, which many do, to what extent should we invite them to consider themselves as sharing the mission of the church? Their misgivings about the term “missionary” are understandable, but research on international SL and perspective transformation links positive long-term outcomes with a specific social justice orientation (Kiely), a clear overlap with contemporary mission theology also encouraging work toward justice. Our experience tells us that combining themes of Catholic social teaching (Bolan), social analysis, inculturation, and global social justice with mission allows international SL to become a powerful integrative faith experience. We also believe that linking international SL with theology

as a practice in which “faith seeks understanding” encourages students to forge faith convictions that include a commitment to global social justice.

Forming Agents for Change

In these ethically challenging times, we believe that universities should have a sense of urgency to educate students with a deeply felt global responsibility to others, and Catholic campus ministers and Catholic universities should play a leading role in pursuit of such a goal. The daunting issues of the twenty-first century require the serious attention of the academy not only to find solutions but to be intentional about educating our students as future leaders mindful of the common good understood in the broadest terms.

International SL shapes these future leaders to be agents for change in the world—to bridge solidarity across socioeconomic, political, and religious borders; to shape how laws and policies are debated, written, and enacted; to change how health and education are delivered; to bequeath a healthier, safer planet to future generations. Students after the ISSLP think, believe, and behave differently. Their emerging global citizenship shapes their Christian discipleship, not only bringing tangible benefits to the church in enhanced participation but generating theological insights that imagine the world made new.

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