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*“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”*

**AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENT VALUES AND CATHOLIC  
SOCIAL TEACHINGS ON BOLIVIAN MISSION TRIPS:  
PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON MEASURING SERVICE  
LEARNING OUTCOMES**

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**An Examination of Student Values and Catholic Social Teachings  
on Bolivian Mission Trips:  
Preliminary Findings on Measuring Service Learning Outcomes**

## **ABSTRACT**

*International service learning has become an opportunity for students in liberal arts and helping professions to gain an integrated understanding of global\social needs, cultural sensitivity and social responsibility from a direct hands-on experience. Service learning also challenges students to contemplate social issues from a moral and ethical dimension. The purpose of this research was to examine the impact of two mission trips (2008 & 2009) with respect to students' personal values and the values embedded in the teachings of Catholic Social Justice. The preliminary findings from this study suggest that students' values change significantly from personal responsibility to a communal responsibility approach. Data also suggest that students think about Catholic Social Teaching in a different way after the experience. This paper describes an overview of the Joliet Diocese Mission work, a review of the literature pertaining to service learning and Catholic Social Teaching, and present data from the study.*

## **KEY WORDS**

Catholic Social Teaching, Service Learning, Service-Learning, Study Aboard, University Mission Trip

## **INTRODUCTION**

Secondary and post secondary education in the United States have recognized the importance of student experiences to understanding, appreciating and working cooperatively with other cultures, different belief systems, and the development of personal values related to community service. Since 1995, the Joliet Catholic Diocese has been sponsoring a university mission trip to Bolivia in June for 14 days. The thirteen years of mission work through the Joliet Diocese has led to the building of a hospital, building of family homes, improving the care in orphanages, schools, and day care facilities. However, the question remains, is the experience fruitful in the perceptions of the participating students from Catholic Universities related to a greater awareness and a commitment to global service needs?

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The definition that one of the university's Service Learning Committee adopted in 2006 states: Service Learning is a pedagogy that engages students in community-based service projects and: 1) is aligned with course content to achieve academic learning outcomes, 2) includes student reflection on service as a significant element of course requirements, and 3) assesses learning outcomes based on service project performance and reflection.

Specifically, this research addressed student views on Catholic Social Teaching and whether the mission trip had an impact on their views.

Catholic Social Teaching is a relatively recent concept in the church's history. It can be traced back to 1891 when Pope Leo XIII wrote his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* subtitled: "*On Capital Labor*" (Massaro, 2000). Since then, the Catholic Church has addressed

such issues as distribution of wealth and economic resources, oppression in third world countries and exploitation of unskilled workers. Preparing future generations in the United States with an emphasis on global issues has taken many Catholic Colleges and Universities in the direction of service learning mission trips. Other schools of higher education have also adopted service learning as a model that teaches students with an experiential component (Moore, 2000).

Bringle & Hatcher define Service Learning as “a course based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (2000, p. 274). Service learning is an academic enterprise that integrates community service activities with educational objectives.

Annette (2003 ) defines service learning as “an experiential learning program where students learn through engaging in service in partnership with a local community. It involves reflective learning activities which enable a student to develop key skills and capabilities, and a greater sense of civic awareness and active citizenship. The experience should be of sufficient length to enable students to benefit fully from it, and they must be challenged to be reflective and to link their learning to their college curriculum.” What seems to enhance the quality of the learning experience is an “integration of academic content with service experience” and “reflective activities” (Hatcher, Bringle & Muthiah, 2004). With respect to the quality of the experience, researchers have found a correlation with opportunity for reflection, substantive links

between coursework and service and ethnic and cultural diversity (Eyler, 2000). Using Dewey's philosophy "good undergraduate education integrates personal experience with academic learning" (Hatcher, 1997, Giles & Eyler, 1994). As technology and globalization brings cultures and countries closer together, higher education is recognizing the need to prepare students to enter a diverse world with a broad mind ready to entertain multiple perspectives in solving world problems (i.e., poverty, hunger, economic disparities and war).

In *A Service Learning Curriculum for Faculty* (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995), Kolb identified four steps that are essential for learning: abstract conceptualization, active participation, concrete experience and reflective observation. Similarly, these are some of the components used when developing a service learning course and/or a mission trip. The recent trend in service learning experience across colleges and universities vary in terms size and scope such as pedagogy, number of hours, length of time, and discipline. Programmatic differences and systematic research methods are a few of the difficulties encountered when examining the outcomes and effects of such experiences (Moore, 2000). Support from administration and participation by faculty play a key role in institutional commitment (Ward, 1996).

The notion of measuring values is complex and difficult to operationalize into specific statements. Values can be thought of "standards that guide thought and action" (Lindemena and Verkasalo, 2005). They play a fundamental role in the structure of society. Values are learned as part of the socialization process, first from our families,

second from our society. Some values are universal, while others may vary from culture to culture. The values imbedded in Catholic Social teachings attempt to capture universal values such as human rights, a spirit of community rather than individuality and a theme of spirituality versus secularism. The key themes of Catholic Social Teaching included: the dignity of every person, solidarity and common good, family life, proper role of the government, dignity of work, colonialism and economic development, peace, and options for the poor and vulnerable (Massaro, 2000).

### History the Mission Trip

The students who attended the Mission trips were primarily from three Catholic Universities, in the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois. The focus of the trip was to serve children in orphanages, residential homes and neurological hospitals. The students worked side by side with staff in the facilities and sponsors from the participating universities. The Mission Vision (Diocese of Joliet, 2006) includes: “In response to the Gospel call of Jesus Christ, the Joliet Diocese Partnership in Mission seeks to form servants for the work of missions and justice as we reach out in service, relief, and friendship to our brothers and sisters around the globe.” The Mission Goals Include:

- To share skills and knowledge with the poorest of the poor
- To deepen one’s own spiritual life by sharing in service, prayer and reflection
- To learn from the poor and alienated in ways that reflects mutuality and solidarity
- To understand the cause of injustice and to find ways of communicating these insights.

The university students prepare for the journey to Bolivia during the year by participating in fundraising activities, attending a mandatory retreat and taking courses that would help

prepare them for the trip (e.g., Spanish). The students, faculty and team members were exposed to a new culture, a new view of the world, a slower pace, acceptance, patience and the potential for a transformative experience. Their assumptions, values, traditions, and way of life in the United States were challenged. This challenge of cultural difference had the potential to enhance cultural dissonance, for the student or team member who was unaware of the less fortunate in third world countries. It also had the potential to enlighten the individual with a new view of the world and to confront oneself with new awareness. This study is a beginning effort to examine the effect of the Joliet diocese's mission trip on college students' perceptions of Catholic social teaching concepts.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 18 students who traveled to Bolivia on the Mission trips and who completed both Pre and Post surveys. The sample represents two cohort years (2008, n=11 and 2009, n=7). The average age of the students was 22 years (range was 18-32). Sixteen students were female, 12 students were Catholic, five were Protestant and one was Jewish. Two students were freshman, two were sophomores, four were juniors and eight students were seniors and two students had graduated. Six students were nursing majors. Education, science and social work\psychology majors each had three students. One student was a theology major.



### ***Instrumentation***

A questionnaire was developed to obtain student information, volunteer experience, opinions about catholic social teaching, foreign involvement in developing countries and personal values. Items on the questionnaire were meant to capture students' position on Catholic Social Teachings. Nine items were formulated using a semantic differential scale.<sup>1</sup> The internal consistency yielded an Alpha coefficient of .88. Additionally, five items were developed to represent values related to helping others.<sup>2</sup> Students indicated their level of agreement on a five-point scale.

The Post survey had six open-ended questions 1) *“What was your most profound experience on the trip?”* 2) *“What did you learn from the mission trip?”* 3) *“How did your learning enhance your personal and professional values?”* 4) *“What do you anticipate your future commitment will be to social justice issues, advocacy or mission work?”* 5) *“Reflect on your university values. How has the mission trip enhanced your commitment to these values?”* and 6) *“What can your university do to reinforce, enhance or assist your commitment to social justice?”* The qualitative data were analyzed separately.

### ***Procedures***

Pre-surveys for the first cohort were distributed and collected prior to leaving for Bolivia.

Students needed approximately twenty minutes to complete the survey. Post-surveys

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<sup>1</sup> The semantic differential asks respondents to choose between two opposite positions (Babbie, 1999). Example: The common good of all people is fostered only if human rights are protected – Life is not fair; the common of all cannot be guaranteed.

<sup>2</sup> Example: We have an obligation to promote the common good by improving the lives of others.

were collected at the airport on the return trip. For the second cohort pre and post surveys were collected electronically using student e-mail addresses.

Students did not receive any instruction on Catholic social teaching, nor were they aware of the purpose of the study. A signed consent form was obtained at the time of the first questionnaire. Students were asked to code the questionnaire using their first and last initials and six digits representing their birth date. This was done in order to match Pre and Post data keeping the surveys anonymous.

## **RESULTS**

In order to test for the discriminate properties of the value statements, a correlation matrix was done with the nine value statements reflecting Catholic Social Teaching. Table 1 show that Value 1 “Every human being has a right to life, food, shelter, education, employment, health care, housing, freedom of religion and family life had a positive correlation with values 3-7, and 9. Value 2 “industrialized countries have a responsibility to assist developing countries” correlated with values 3 & 5. Value 3 “The common good of all people is fostered only if human rights are protected” correlated with values 1, 2, 4 -7 and 9. Value 4 “Prayer is meaningful and has an impact on people’s lives” correlated with 1,3,5,7 and 9. Value 5 “Human life must be protected in its most vulnerable stages” correlated with values 1-4, 6 and 9. Value 6 ”When vast equalities exist, people of faith must act” correlated with 1,3,5,7 and 9. Value 7 “Mission work can promote hope, perseverance and reward for those providing service” correlated with 1, 3, 4, 6 and 9. Value 8 “The disadvantaged often experience satisfaction, joy and gratitude in life” correlated with value 9. Value 9 “What happens in industrialized countries

affects the economic and social climate of developing countries” correlated with 1 and 3-8.

[Insert Table 1]

Students were asked if they had participated in other volunteer activities including mission trips. Other volunteer activities included Big Brothers\Big Sisters, homeless shelters, parish activities, etc. On the average, students had 2.4 volunteer experiences.

Paired *t-tests* were conducted using Pre and Post scores on the nine values reflecting Catholic Social Teaching. Table 2 shows the mean for Pre and Post scores. The scale ranged from 2 to -2. Positive ratings aligned with Catholic Social Teaching while negative scores reflected opposite views. Results indicate that eight items increased positively the level of agreement to Catholic Social Teaching values. Value 4 “*Prayer is meaningful and has an impact on people’s lives*” and Value 6 “*When vast inequalities exist, people of faith must act*” showed a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ). Value 5 “*Human life must be protected in its most vulnerable stages*” and Value 9 “*What happens in industrialized countries affects the economic and social climate of developing countries*” approached the level of significance ( $p=.06$  and  $.05$ , respectively). When comparing the means of the composite score there was also a significant difference ( $p=.02$ ).

[Insert Table 2]

Paired *t-tests* were also conducted using the last five items on the questionnaire which reflect personal values with respect to helping others. Table 3 shows that one of the items changed significantly. After the trip, students agreed more strongly with the

following statement; “*When we attend to the needs of those in want; we give them what is theirs, not ours*”. When comparing the means of the composite score of the five personal values there was also a significant difference (p=.01).

[Insert Table 3]

Common verbal themes emerged in the open-ended questions in the Post survey.

Students were struck by the poverty: It challenged them to think how industrialized nations may have contributed to this poverty and it made them aware of how much they take for granted. Students also remarked about how sweet and gentle the people were and genuinely grateful for their help. One student wrote: “What I remember most about this trip was the love and gratitude of the Bolivian People. They were extremely proud of themselves and their culture but showed us that they appreciated ours as well.

Students were immersed in the culture of Bolivia and the values related to slower pace of life and not watching a time clock. The afternoon siesta was practiced and everything in the university and the town shut down during 12-2 p.m. Other customs such as prayer and attending daily mass also opened the students awareness of how other countries practice their Catholic Faith.

Students were astonished that homeless children, ages 7-12, were shining shoes in the central park area to survive. Older siblings were caring for younger siblings, while sleeping in doorways at night and attending the soup kitchen at noon. Gratitude and faith was seen and experienced by these children as they said prayers before meals. At the

orphanage the children were very welcoming and appreciative for the items that were given to them by the students.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study represents preliminary findings that examined student values with respect to Catholic social teaching while on a mission trip to Bolivia. The findings indicate that student values changed in the direction more closely agreeing with items that reflected helping those less fortunate and ensuring human rights. It seemed that they began to see their role in life as part of a larger community and reaching out to others is an important way to make a difference. This study did not examine students' perception of the quality of the Bolivia experience nor with their satisfaction with the mission trip per se.

Interestingly, the open-ended questions did not reveal any negative feelings or criticisms. Rather we were interested how their experiences translate into a transformation of a world view and a change in values. Our findings confirm other studies that the notion of service learning can be transformative and affect the values of participants (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999), (Eyler, 1994).

The students who attend Catholic Universities may already have a different sense of human justice and moral obligation. One would then expect to see no significant change. However, this study does have empirical evidence that these trips have a profound change in students. As this study becomes part of a longitudinal study with comparisons across years and follow-up of students as they leave their university perhaps we'll find a commitment to service and a lasting change in global perspectives.

Another specific issue in service learning is whether service learning mandatory versus voluntary. The Bolivia mission trip is voluntary and takes place in the beginning of the summer, after the spring semester. Students spend the better part of six months preparing for the trip, engaging in fundraising activities and developing a sense of cohesiveness as a group. The question of a self-selection bias arises. Are students who elect to attend the mission trip already different with respect to moral values and Christian obligations in helping the disadvantaged? Moreover, this experience may not be fully integrated into the students' lives until later as they progress through other stages in life.

Other issues that may be addressed in the future are the reentry experiences of the students as they return to the United States and how do these experiences further the students' reflection? As educators we need to support and promote in students the spirit of enthusiasm for civic-minded engagement during their learning to prepare for their profession?

### **LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH**

The sample of individuals in this study is small. Generalizability of the results to other populations or other university mission trips is problematic. We also note that the qualitative aspect of this study is perhaps more appropriate when trying to tease out the issues what can then be studied on a larger scale. The qualitative data seemed to unearth what matters in the learning experience. This was also confirmed by (Tonkin, et al., 2004) The quantitative aspect while it showed some changes in beliefs, it did not explain the changes.

Some of the surveys from the first cohort (approximately 10) were not included because the students failed to use the same identification code. The second cohort is a smaller number because not all students responded to the electronic survey.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Evaluating the transformation of mission work on students is not easy. The effects are long lasting, not immediately obvious and evolve over time as new life opportunities allow integration and maturation. Assessing whether an experience of a two and one half week mission trip actually changed an individual is more difficult. The behavior, life choices, commitment to service over time will bear the fruit of the experience. The reflection of the experience maybe delayed. Transformative learning may emerge years later. The internalization of learning may have an immediate impact or may take years to realize. This study did not address the intercultural competence and learning but it is evident that the students were impacted by the Bolivian culture. The experience of two and one half weeks certainly cannot have the impact of a total emersion program that extends for a semester. What is also evident from the students' narrative is that their school should have more of these types of opportunities and that more students should be supported in these efforts.

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Table 1.

<b>Value Statement Correlation</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
Every human being has a right to life, food, shelter, education, employment, health care, housing, freedom of religion and family life. (1)									
Industrialized countries have the responsibility to assist developing countries. (2)		.526*							
The common good of all people is fostered only if human rights are protected. (3)	.636**								
Prayer is meaningful and has an impact on people's lives. (4)	.804**		.653**						
Human Life must be protected in its most vulnerable stages. (5)	.531*	.532*	.553*	.550*					
When vast inequalities exist, people of faith must act. (6)	.497*		.640*		.700**				
Mission work can promote hope, perseverance and reward for those providing service. (7)	.773**		.715**	.664**		.470*			
The disadvantage often experience satisfaction, joy, and gratitude in life. (8)									
What happens in industrialized countries affects the economic and social climate of developing countries. (9)	.633**		.682*	.617**	.480*	.698**	.597**	.612**	

\* \*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2

<b>Catholic Social Teaching Statements</b>	<b>Pre</b>	<b>Post</b>
Every human being has a right to life, food, shelter, education, employment, health care, housing, freedom of religion, and family life.	1.5	1.7
Industrialized countries have the responsibility to assist developing countries.	1.1	1.3
The common good of all people is fostered only if human rights are protected.	.83	1.3
Prayer is meaningful and has an impact on people's lives.	1.0	1.6*
Human Life must be protected in its most vulnerable stages.	1.1	1.5
When vast inequalities exist, people of faith must act.	1.0	1.6*
Mission work can promote hope, perseverance and reward for those providing service.	1.5	1.4
The disadvantaged often experience satisfaction, joy, and gratitude in life.	.83	1.4
What happens in industrialized countries affects the economic and social climate of developing countries.	1.1	1.5
<b>Total composite score</b>	<b>9.9</b>	<b>13.6</b>

\* &lt; .05

Table 4

<b>Personal Value Statements</b>	<b>Time 1</b>	<b>Time 2</b>
I have received great privileges in life; in return, I will give to others in need.	4.55	4.61
Giving to others helps me grow and develop to my potential.	4.61	4.83
When we attend to the needs of those in want; we give them what is theirs, not ours.	3.38	4.05*
All individuals are responsible for their well-being	3.22	3.55*
We have an obligation to promote the common good by trying to improve the lives of others.	4.50	4.55
<b>Total composite score</b>	<b>20.27</b>	<b>21.61*</b>

\* &lt; .05

### Author Biographies

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- 2) Dorothea Epple, Ph.D., LCSW is a Social Work Professor at the Grand Valley State University in Michigan. Her 26 years of experience include teaching, working in mental health centers, psychiatric hospitals, hospice and Catholic Charities out-patient counseling. Her special interests are journal writing, and integrating social work with faith. During 2008, Dr. Epple worked at the University of St. Francis and attended the Bolivian Mission Trip as a guest lecturer.