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**FROM SERVICE TO SOLIDARITY:
EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING**

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For service learning pedagogy to live up to its fullest and most authentic potential, educators must address the pitfalls of privilege that often go unexamined in relationships between groups of affluent university students and underprivileged populations that service learning programs traditionally seek to “serve.” In order to address dynamics of power and privilege inherent in any relationship between those who “give service” and those who are “served”, a relationship of honesty, reciprocity and mutuality must be established and promoted between those two groups. This study is an effort to further establish such a relationship by fully involving Salvadoran partners in the evaluation of the Grand Valley State University School of Social Work Service Learning program in El Salvador. This evaluation has been conducted in order to more learn from Grand Valley’s international partners, and to include their voices in further development of the program. As a result of the response from Salvadorans stakeholders, this paper seeks to further investigate the distinction between the ideas of service and solidarity, and the ways in which solidarity can contribute to larger social change and potentially diminish the need for “service” altogether.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As the result of a generous grant from the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, the Grand Valley State University School of Social Work Service Learning Program in El Salvador (SW 354/630), under the direction of Dr. Julia Guevara, has been assessed and evaluated from the perspective of Salvadoran host agencies, professionals and community volunteers. The goal of this research was to secure quantitative and qualitative feedback from

Salvadoran stakeholders regarding their motivations for participation with the Grand Valley program, and their opinions on the program's efficacy relative to Salvadoran needs and vision. Furthermore, Salvadoran stakeholders were asked to reflect on what they see as the benefits for participation, and make suggestions for program improvement.

A thorough review of the literature relevant to four main areas of interest has been conducted. These areas of interest are as follows: (1) "El Salvador: The Context of Service" (2) "Service Learning and Some Critical Concerns", (2) "Service Learning and the International Experience" (3) "Community Based Evaluation of Service Learning". All of these subtopics are intimately linked, and each will be discussed in detail.

In order to gather this essential feedback from Salvadoran agencies, professionals and community volunteers, interviews were conducted with 11 program stakeholders in El Salvador, during the spring of 2002. The feedback provided by Salvadoran stakeholders is of the utmost importance in order to ensure the program's continued success for Grand Valley students and Salvadoran hosts alike. Detailed assessments of the program's successes and failures, as perceived by Salvadoran stakeholders, can now guide the School of Social Work and Grand Valley State University in further cultivation of a true partnership through service learning with the people of El Salvador.

EL SALVADOR: THE CONTEXT OF SERVICE

El Salvador is a country that is no stranger to death and destruction, nor is it unfamiliar with being the beneficiary of international service and assistance. Its recent history has been marked by natural and manmade disasters, from civil war to earthquakes and hurricanes, making this country one that has often needed the help of the international community.

During El Salvador's brutal civil war, which lasted 12 years (1980-1992), and claimed the lives of 80,000 people, the U.S. government directly supported El Salvador's repressive right-wing government, in order to prevent the spread of communism. Under the Reagan administration, massive military and economic aid was given to El Salvador's government. (Hertvik, 2002). Further U.S involvement in the civil war was discovered in 1989, after the murder of 6 Jesuit priests, a housekeeper and her daughter at the Universidad de Central America (UCA). In the early nineties, a Congressional taskforce headed by Congressman Joe Moakley, found that from a very high level, the armed forces of El Salvador, supported by the U.S. government, had been responsible for the murders of the Jesuits (Moakley, 1991).

As a result of the country's civil war, El Salvador has been left with little foreign investment, and with roads, power lines and other basic services in tatters. (Kaufman & Gonzalez, 2001) After a ceasefire was established in 1992, when rebels of the FMLN and the ARENA government signed Peace Accords,

Salvadorans were assured political and military reforms and impunity for all human rights abuses during the civil war. Further, rightist “death squads”, trained by the U.S. military supported School of the Americas, were said to be eliminated. However, the peace accords did not expound on social reforms.

El Salvador is also known for the many earthquakes that occur within its borders. In January, 2001, an earthquake that measured 7.6 on the Richter scale caused landslides which killed more than 850 people, and destroyed 100,000 homes. This natural disaster was followed in February, 2001 by a second earthquake that killed 300 people.

Currently almost half of El Salvador’s 6.7 million people live in poverty. (Engler, 2002). This country’s stratified economy leaves the richest fifth of its population with 45% of the country’s income, while the poorest fifth receives only 5.6%. (Engler, 2002). Such unequal income distribution encourages many Salvadorans to seek a better life elsewhere, producing an influx of illegal immigrants to the U.S. In the past 20 years, almost two million Salvadorans have fled to the U.S. in search of jobs. With Salvadorans fleeing to the U.S. in such great numbers, this country’s national economy is greatly dependent on the more than \$1.3 billion in ex-patriot remittances sent to El Salvador annually.

El Salvador, not unlike many other developing countries, is in many ways at the mercy of the United States, through unfair trade policies, covert military operations and taxpayer support of repressive Salvadoran governments. The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), recently signed into law in August, 2005 furthers the agenda of its predecessor, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), by further opening up trade borders between the U.S. and its neighbors to the south. CAFTA will increase imports to the U.S. from industries that specialize in low-wage labor, specifically the maquiladora industry, or sweatshops that produce cheap goods for export to the U.S. While at face value, CAFTA may seem to be good economic policy for El Salvador, due to the increase in jobs that it can provide for the region, the quality of those jobs will be very low. Multinational corporations that operate maquilas traditionally pay workers very little, offer sub-standard working conditions, require workdays of 16-20 hours, do not allow for union activity, and thwart or ignore national environmental and labor regulations. These multinational corporations that proclaim economic prosperity in the developing world as a result of NAFTA and CAFTA, are highly mobile, and seek the lowest bidder in what many opponents of globalization call “the race to the bottom.”

Many of these forces that together contribute to El Salvador’s dire situation, can be linked to the United States and our role and influence in the region. It is imperative that as American citizens and educators, we take the responsibility to be a part of a solution for the problem that we have helped to create, seriously. It is in this context that service learning takes place.

SERVICE LEARNING AND SOME CRITICAL CONCERNS

Service learning can take place on a domestic or an international stage, each with varying implications and results. No matter the venue, service learning pedagogy is generally based on three overlapping objectives. Service learning at its finest (1) [Makes] “A contribution to the host community, (2) [Contributes to] the creation of a consciousness of the civil society through participation, and (3) strengthens the interaction between academia and the world outside” (Woolf, 2005).

Often, it is perceived that the “service” piece of service learning is an inherent good. That is, service is often seen as freely dedicated time by individuals to contribute to the greater good of society. This assumption about the “inherent good” of the freely “donated” time of individuals, who are generally in a position of power and privilege and who thereby have the time and the means to be able to do “service”, has the potential to override our critical sensibilities, and do more harm than good. Service learning must be more than the donation of time, or charity. This pedagogy must be designed to be intentionally mutual and inclusive in its structure and relationships, and must require critical reflection by all parties regarding the implications of the service learning relationship for those parties.

Three cornerstone principles of service learning, as set forth by one of service learning’s pedagogical pioneers, Robert Sigmon, serve to inform the *kind* of structure and relationships that must be developed for service learning to live up to the “good” that it is capable of. Sigmon’s principles state that (1) Those being served control the services provided, (2) Those being served become better able to serve and be served by their own actions and (3) Those who serve are also learners and have significant control over what is expected to be learned (Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999).

It must be noted, however, that even these principles are loaded with language that denotes privilege and a certain inequality in the service learning relationship. To be *served* implies neediness, while being in the position to *give service* implies the opposite. Some critics of service learning pedagogy charge that without careful observance and implementation of the criteria set forth by Sigmon, and I would argue, the critical evaluation of power relations established by Sigmon’s language, service learning will likely contribute to the perpetuation of a paternalistic paradigm. A relationship based on the assumption that the privileged “haves” can “help” the needy “have-nots” is particularly dangerous as it “actually reinforces prejudice and replicates power differentials between those conferring and those receiving the service” (King, 2004).

Often, university service learning programs are established with end goals for a community service project having already been determined by the university, without soliciting or including community partners in the discussion. The implicit assumption is that the university knows best, and that community

“needs” their “help”. In order to avoid the pitfalls of this assumption, it is critical that prior to the implementation of a service learning program, partner communities (or organizations) are identified and established who are interested in the *cooperative development* of a program that will address a *mutually established vision*, and where *both parties* will serve and be served.

In addition to the establishment of a relationship based on mutual vision and goals, and reciprocal service, it is imperative that students engage in the critical reflection necessary to understand their service learning experience in the “larger context of issues of social justice and social policy - rather than in the context of charity” (Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999).

Without necessary reflection on the nature of power relations as a part of students’ preparation for service, these students have the potential to do a great disservice to themselves and to host communities by not understanding the social framework within which their service will be carried out. True service learning partnership calls for the kind of critical awareness in students that must be cultivated through “structured opportunities for critical reflection on service so that students can “better understand the causes of social injustice...[and] take actions to eliminate the causes” (Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999, p.3).

SERVICE LEARNING AND THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

In an international setting, differences between university students and community stakeholders are often much more clearly apparent than such distinctions in service learning programs domestically. The disparities between the “haves” and the “have-nots” are further illustrated and highlighted when students visit a developing country, such as El Salvador, and witness firsthand the desperate conditions of poverty that more than half of the world’s population lives in. When students begin to ask “why”, and to reflect upon the causes of international economic and political inequality that create the need for service learning in the first place, the inescapable conclusion is that we, the “haves”, are in a position of power and influence, and that we must examine our part in the perpetuation of this inequality. When done well, international service learning encourages students to seek a critical understanding of the social and economic inequalities reflected in their own experience, and demonstrated in the stories and real lives of the people they meet while abroad. Through personal interaction with those who are in dramatically less privileged positions, students ideally begin to look at the idea of service through a different lens. Students’ “engagement with poor people and their struggle to survive, when combined with personal and academic reflection, can help students become the authors of their lives and contribute to addressing the global situation” (Baxter-Magolda, 2004). With proper guidance, students can learn to critically examine their own place in the world, and their relationship to power, privilege and service.

SOLIDARITY

Part of the assessment of SW 354/630 has been to ask what the intention of service is for this program. What do Grand Valley and Salvadoran stakeholders consider as their vision for what service should mean in this relationship? Through the interviews conducted with Salvadoran hosts and stakeholders, a very new definition of what service learning *can be* has emerged. Nearly all of the stakeholders interviewed reported that they participate in the Grand Valley program for the same primary reason. All shared various reasons for participating, but by far stakeholders reported that their most compelling interest in the program is the opportunity to develop a relationship of solidarity with American students.

The term solidarity has traditionally been used by the organized labor movement. However, the idea of solidarity here might best be defined as a fellowship of responsibilities and interests that places equal value on all members of that fellowship. Solidarity is the practice of partnership, focused on collective social action, with the goal of positive social change as a result. In the context of service learning, emphasis should be given to the “action” that takes place as a result of this fellowship of responsibilities and interests.

According to Brecher, Costello and Smith (2000), the process of social change begins when “some people internally question or reject some aspects of the status quo...[Social change] becomes a social process as people discover that others are having similar experiences, identifying the same problems, asking the same questions, and being tempted to make the same rejections” (Brecher, Costello and Smith, 2000). The intercultural exchange and dialogue between cultures made possible by consciously developed international service learning programs can promote cross cultural solidarity and global social change through development of the compassionate imagination. This compassionate imagination “makes other people’s lives more than distant abstractions” and encourages students to “see themselves as not simply citizens of some local region or group, but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by recognition and concern: as ‘citizens of the world’.” (Nussbaum, 2004) When students are able to transcend the boundaries of culture, class and ethnicity, they become capable of seeing themselves and those who they seek to “serve” as equal partners and ‘citizens of the world’. Thus, an equitable relationship of solidarity, the basis for social change, becomes possible.

The venue that international service learning provides to students, and community stakeholders alike, is one that allows for the intersection of people who might not otherwise meet, particularly in large numbers, or with any consistency. The intimate exposure of privileged students to the lives and stories of real people who are often simply objectified as the “have-nots”, together with critical reflection, allows students to “begin to identify with those others and to

interact with them. This turns what might have been an individual and isolating process into a social one” (Brecher, Costello and Smith, 2000.)

Students who visit El Salvador are able to see firsthand the effects of El Salvador’s brutal and repressive history. Informational meetings, readings and reflection sessions encourage students to question the connection between the United States and El Salvador, its history and current condition. The realization that there is a connection between themselves as U.S. citizens and the wretched stories of war and oppression told to them by the Salvadorans who actually lived these stories, begins to become clear to students. It is for *this* reason that program stakeholders share their stories. Salvadorans ask that students act in solidarity and use their voices in our powerful country to affect change on their behalf. Salvadoran stakeholders shake hands with American students with the unsaid expectation and trust that their stories will not go unheard. Program stakeholders expect students to advocate on their behalf here in the United States, and according to them, this is the most valuable aspect of the service learning partnership.

Rather than providing a service that perpetuates or accepts the dependence of Salvadorans on others, the service of solidarity is an act of partnership that seeks to transform the structural causes of injustice and empower those perceived to be in need of service. The most invaluable “service” that university students, faculty and administration could “provide” to community partners would be to examine our own part in the creation and perpetuation of unjust economic and political systems, and to challenge the existing status quo upon which that inequality is based. For the “service” of service learning to be authentic and true to the best interests of community partners, universities and students alike would do well to “work ourselves out of a job”, so to speak. The service of solidarity is that which identifies, examines and challenges the root causes of injustice, which in turn create a need for “service” in the first place.

COMMUNITY BASED EVALUTATION OF SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning requires that the partnership between university and community uphold three interrelated and overlapping notions. (1) Reciprocity, has several main characteristics, including the following; that benefits are perceived by both sides in the service learning relationship, that an interconnection exists between teaching and learning in the university and in the community, and finally, that there is a balanced interchange and a sense of being fully vested in the project and complementing one another. (2) Mutuality is a sense of common vision, stemming from intensive conversations about goals. (3) Power lies in the validation of community members and community-based learning (Boyle-Baise, et al, 2001).

Each of these notions calls for the equal input and investment of university and community in program development and evaluation. Because the development of these qualities in the service learning relationship depends on community-based evaluation of programs, such evaluation is essential. Without community-based evaluation, service learning becomes one-sided, self serving and serves to perpetuate hierarchy and dependence.

A review of the literature relevant to service learning evaluation points to a general lack of critical attention to the motivations, intentions and outcomes of service learning from the community perspective (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). According to Cruz & Giles, the lack of research done on community outcomes of service learning can be attributed to several key factors. First, there exist “politically-charged concerns about academic rigor” that plague the field of service learning and cause many advocates for service learning to spend time and resources defending the legitimacy of student academic outcomes. Secondly, “funders, seeking to document and evaluate their investments, have made student outcome research a priority in their grant-making.” Lastly, the ambiguity of a common definition for “community” makes community research difficult to generalize, and therefore legitimize. Adding to the difficulty of the ability to generalize research in this area, all communities are dynamic and different, and therefore it is difficult to control for all possible variables (Cruz & Giles, 2000).

Further difficulty in evaluating service learning programs stems from program objective development processes. While course objectives for students enrolled in service learning programs are generally clear and well defined, objectives for community counterparts often are vague or imprecise. With community objectives commonly being so vaguely defined, evaluation of such outcomes is difficult, and arguably invalid. Given that service learning is the undertaking of the university, the objectives for service learning often tend to be primarily student focused. In a service learning program that lacks a true sense of partnership and reciprocity with the community, objectives for partner or host communities end up being developed secondarily. When objectives for the community are defined, often they are developed *for* the community *by* the university. Objectives developed in this paternalistic manner inherently lack mutuality - the sense of common vision stemming from intensive conversations about goals for service and learning that are critical to true partnership (Boyle-Baise, et al. 2001). Many universities perpetuate the split between campus and community by looking at service learning as a way for higher education to do *for* the community as opposed to a way to do *with* the community (Ward, Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Without community partners defining their own objectives for participation in service learning programs, the community becomes little more than a laboratory for the use of privileged students, rather than being a true partner in learning.

If advocates of service learning wish to stay true to the fundamental nature of this style of inquiry and action, it is imperative that universities begin asking community partners for guidance in development of objectives and program development, as well as in program evaluation. Through the community-based assessment of SW 354/630 that has been conducted, Grand Valley State University has the opportunity to set the standard for true partnership, and to truly hear and listen to the voices of the Salvadoran communities that we claim to “serve.” This inquiry will serve to forge a strong sense of mutuality between Grand Valley and community hosts and stakeholders in El Salvador.

GVSU PROGRAM BACKGROUND

SW 354 / 630 has been offered to both graduate and undergraduate level students once per year since 1998. Under the supervision of Dr. Guevara, a total of approximately 50 Grand Valley students have taken part in the class. This course has four major goals, including the following: (1) To increase students’ awareness of the degree to which global interdependence is evident in social work practice, (2) To develop students’ awareness of the applicability of global knowledge to domestic social problems, (3) To provide students with an opportunity to contribute to the solution of global issues, and (4) To provide students with opportunities to learn more about themselves and their potential to recognize and address global issues in their professional careers (Guevara, 1998). While in El Salvador, students take part in numerous discussions and seminars with Salvadoran experts and ordinary citizens alike, visit various social service agencies and receive extensive education, both theoretical and practical, in order to illuminate the reality of life in El Salvador. Students take part in service placements with various Salvadoran social service agencies and nonprofit organizations whose missions range from environmental advocacy to assisting homeless street children. While in service placements, students learn about social work in El Salvador and provide a service to the host agency. The manner in which students serve their respective host agencies and other Salvadoran stakeholders, and the ways that this service might be improved are the topics of inquiry in this paper.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODS

In order to assess SW 354/630 from the Salvadoran perspective, 11 program stakeholders were contacted for an interview. Those interviewees included stakeholders who had been involved with the GVSU program for a sufficiently long enough time to be able to critically reflect on the program, its mission and goals, its level of efficacy and the level of partnership between GVSU and the Salvadoran partners. Interviewees were initially contacted by a

GVSU liaison in El Salvador, then through a letter explaining the research project and Grand Valley's desire for their participation in the research.

Those who were interviewed represented a cross-section of Salvadoran program participants. A survey was designed to reflect the type of qualitative feedback that can serve to inform the mutual assessment process. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, through discussion of questions and responses with the interviewees. These conversations were tape-recorded, transcribed and translated for further review. (See Tables 1. & 2. for a list of interviewees, and the survey instrument.)

Stakeholders who were interviewed were asked a number of questions regarding their involvement with the Grand Valley program. The primary areas of interest in the interviews included: (1) reasons for and benefits of participation, (2) program criticism, and (3) suggestions for improving the program. A number of common themes reoccurred throughout the interviews. Many of the interviewees echoed each others' praises and repeated similar criticisms and suggestions.

SALVADORAN VOICES: INTERVIEWS, ASSESSMENTS AND STAKEHOLDER RECOMMENDATIONS

Salvadoran Reasons for and Benefits of Participation:

Solidarity. By far, the most frequently cited response, when asked for the reasons why a given stakeholder or organization participates with the GVSU Social Work program, was the idea of solidarity. Salvadorans generally acknowledge that on the global stage, their voices, the voices of the poor and disenfranchised, often go unheard. It is with this acknowledgement that solidarity, organizing, and the power in numbers becomes especially important.

According to interview respondents, solidarity takes several forms. Program stakeholders articulated the importance of educating the American public about the reality of poverty in El Salvador. Respondents repeatedly made the connection between El Salvador's desperate conditions and the economic and political systems in place in the U.S. One respondent stated, "American students see things in the news. Now they are able to make connections, and give a face to the issues they know." This kind of "connection" makes action all the more urgent. When students see, firsthand, the lives of real people suffering at the hands of U.S. policy, it becomes nearly incomprehensible to remain on the sidelines.

Stakeholders asked students to become active in their advocacy for El Salvador at home. Said one respondent, "The most important thing is that the North American people realize the reality of El Salvador and bring this information to the other side (the U.S.)" Another commented, "the propaganda that the Salvadoran government sends to the U.S. isn't true. The American

people need to see the truth here.” Salvadoran stakeholders expressed their trust in the students’ ability and promise to share their experiences and the history and current state of affairs in El Salvador with U.S. citizens, at home. “Students have a good memory,” one respondent said. “They don’t forget what we say. We share solidarity.” This trust is at the heart of Salvadoran participation in the GVSU Social Work Program.

The idea of solidarity was further described by a Salvadoran stakeholder as “the feeling of international support and awareness...That we are not alone.” The importance of recognition and validation was also expressed. One respondent commented that “Salvadoran youth feel like their own government, society and community don’t recognize the work that they do. The Grand Valley program allows North Americans to appreciate the work of Salvadoran youth, and shows the youth that there’s something of value here: them.” The recognition that the international presence brings to Salvadorans was echoed by others. One respondent stated, “Just the presence of international visitors means so much to the youth, and the community sees this.”

Cultural Exchange. A second reason that was commonly given for participation with the Grand Valley Social Work program was the benefit of “intercambio”, or cultural exchange. Responses that spoke to the importance of “intercambio” included one respondent who stated, “This program permits a mutual exchange of ideas and experience. Everybody wins, principally our children.” Another stakeholder echoed this sentiment, saying, “we get to know each other and understand our cultural differences. Through this program, we can start breaking through all of that.” An underlying assumption was present in stakeholder responses about the inherent goodness of mutual understanding and exchange of ideas. It seemed to be a general understanding that such international relations are inherently and genuinely good, in and of themselves.

Material Aid. Prior to their departure to El Salvador, GVSU students put together a materials drive in order to bring needed material aid (clothing, medical materials, school supplies, etc.) with them for distribution at partner agencies. Although some stakeholders expressed gratitude for these material items, this was hardly a main theme relevant to the reasons for participation. This aspect of the GVSU program was not spoken of often in the interviews. One respondent said, “The toys, clothes and money have all helped. Every little bit helps.”

Salvadoran Program Criticism:

Language barrier. The most obvious barrier noted by respondents was the language barrier. Many Grand Valley students go to El Salvador lacking more than a very basic level of Spanish proficiency. On the same token, most Salvadorans lack the same ability to communicate in English. Many respondents mentioned this issue, and although most acknowledged that a better ability to

communicate would enhance the level of cultural exchange, the impression was that the overall quality of the program and the “intercambio” experience did not suffer as a result. “The language barrier is an issue for both students and community members, but not a big problem,” quipped one respondent. Although language is such an obvious barrier to communication, many stakeholders responded that it was a surmountable issue. “Language is a difficulty, not a problem,” said one respondent, “we learn from each other and find words and ways to communicate.”

Program length. Many Salvadorans lamented the short duration of the GVSU program. GVSU students participate in field placements while in El Salvador, for a period of two days. This experience allows Grand Valley students the opportunity to observe Salvadoran social service agencies at work. Stakeholders varied in their opinions about the value of such short-term placements. One respondent said, “The ideal would be for students to be here longer, but although it’s only 2 days of placements, it’s worth it.” On the flip side, others made comments such as, “We are not learning from students, there’s too little time” and “There is no balance of learning. In a month or more, students can contribute here, but not in a day or two.”

Salvadoran Suggestions for Program Improvement:

Pre-trip Student Preparation. Without proper orientation prior to such a dramatic cultural and economic reality shift, American students risk missing the benefits of the cultural exchange, altogether, while potentially doing more harm than good in their host country. Students’ maturity level, and their level of identity development must be closely matched with the appropriate international experience, for when students are emotionally or intellectually ill prepared for the magnitude of the poverty and injustice witnessed in El Salvador, like in many other developing countries, they have the potential to revert back into the safety of their own cultural “bubble,” and behave in ways that can act to reinforce negative American stereotypes. Through grouping closely together with other American students, by emotionally and intellectually refusing to fully process and experience all that El Salvador has to offer them, and by reinforcing previously held cultural and political values, in order to maintain an image of self that is familiar and comfortable, unprepared American students miss the boat.

American students who are ill-prepared to experience the Third World, and to explore their own personal connection to the injustice and poverty therein, tend to go into “denial” in the ways that alcoholics do when confronted with their addiction. American consumers (students and faculty, alike) need to come to terms with our own addictions to comfort, excess and immediate gratification before we can fully see them for what they are, and begin to

understand the effects that our rampant consumerism has on our fellow citizens of the world.

In interviews with Salvadoran stakeholders, many of the recommendations for program improvement centered around this subject of student preparation. Stakeholders repeatedly stated that a more thoroughly prepared student body would enhance the experience for everyone involved, both students and Salvadorans, alike. In order to better prepare our students for the potential depth and transformative effect of the international experience, we would do well to listen to the voices of our Salvadoran partners. Salvadoran stakeholders suggested a number of ways that students could be better prepared for the cultural “intercambio” that takes place when groups of American students visit El Salvador.

Ideas for pre-trip student preparation abounded in interviews with Salvadoran stakeholders. Types of suggested preparation for American students included the study of Salvadoran culture, history and economy; pre-departure relationship building; basic Spanish language instruction; and students’ critical examination of power and privilege.

The GVSU Social Work Program currently has in place an orientation session that includes in-depth readings and discussion on Salvadoran culture, history, economy and politics. Salvadoran stakeholder recommendations support this orientation process.

One Salvadoran stakeholder suggested that students should have contact with Salvadoran partner agencies prior to student placements. “Students should familiarize themselves with their respective host agencies prior to arrival in El Salvador... Students and host agencies could e-mail periodic updates and correspond with one another prior to the trip and placement.” This relationship building could serve to inform both student and partner agency expectations for the experience, begin positive communication, and provide a general overview of the agency for the student, and vice versa. In a similar vein, one Salvadoran partner suggested that GVSU students should bring a presentation to the community or their respective agency about life in the U.S. or Grand Valley, to promote a deeper sense of reciprocal international understanding, increasing the benefit of the student’s presence to Salvadoran partners. Something as simple as a cultural presentation about life in the U.S. by the student at a host agency or host family could greatly enhance the perceived benefit to Salvadorans for hosting US students. Without this kind of gesture, the greatest immediate benefit of the “intercambio” would be to the student, who has the benefit of being present in a foreign host country, and who is exposed to the breadth and depth of that culture, while there.

In-Country Program Suggestions. Stakeholders mentioned a number of various suggestions for in-country program improvement, none of which emerged as themes, but all of which are valuable for further program improvement, specifically relevant to the needs and vision of Salvadorans.

One Respondent suggested a community assembly should be convened upon the students' arrival in order to introduce students to the community and discuss the reasons for their presence. Such an assembly would be feasible in a small village, like Santa Marta, but not likely to be very inclusive in a large city like San Salvador. Another suggestion that further encourages the theme of immersion and dialogue with the community was that GVSU students would "stay with youth from the various host agencies, in order to get to know their reality in more depth." Further suggestions for general in-country program improvement included hosting A final conference day for students and host agency representatives, after service placements have occurred, was suggested as a way to keep Salvadoran community members abreast of what students have been involved with while in El Salvador. This final conference day could also provide a venue for student or faculty-led evaluation of the various host agencies, and a forum to exchange social work techniques and recommendations.

Post-trip Follow Up and Continued Relationship Building. In order to build upon relationships developed with community stakeholders during student trips to El Salvador, and further grow those relationships into mutual, reciprocal relationships of solidarity, GVSU faculty and students must establish a means of on-going communication with their Salvadoran counterparts. The idea of continued correspondence was brought up in many interviews. Salvadorans suggested that GVSU students send letters to host agencies, the elderly, youth and other community members upon return to the U.S., in order to "promote a feeling of equality and demonstrate to Salvadoran clients that Grand Valley students do not regard them just as objects to come and observe." Furthermore, the development of a website documenting former students, host agencies and projects undertaken would promote the on-going type of communication that would foster solidarity by linking people together around common goals and projects. Salvadorans would be able to see the kinds of advocacy projects GVSU students have undertaken on their behalf at home, and could provide their support and feedback regarding those projects, while supplying valuable input to inform potential future projects.

Salvadoran Professional and Student Exchange. To encourage a greater benefit to the Salvadoran community agencies, stakeholders suggested an "exchange of professionals." Some stakeholders suggested sending Salvadoran professionals to travel to the U.S. for cultural study and immersion. Others thought that the idea of sending qualified American professionals, capable of assisting Salvadoran agencies with technical capacity building, would create the conditions for Salvadoran and American professionals to work together for the greater good of the field of social work. By sending a group of American professionals, rather than, or in addition to students, to Salvadoran organizations, or by bringing Salvadoran professionals to the U.S. for an exchange, each group would benefit from their shared expertise. Both groups,

and their respective clientele would gain by developing a deeper sense of respect and understanding for another culture, and from the wealth of knowledge that would be convened by bringing such a diverse group of professionals to the same table. One participant stated, “if Grand Valley would send professionals, or students of a higher academic level, with more experience, the benefits for us would be much greater. Social workers here would benefit from the increased knowledge of American visitors, while they could learn from us.”

Material Support. Like when respondents were asked about the reasons they participated with the GVSU program, material support was mentioned, but was done so peripherally. Respondents appreciated the material support offered and mentioned continued material support as a means to continue helping Salvadoran partner agencies.

A new twist on the traditional idea of material support (medicine, clothing, etc.) that was suggested by one stakeholder proposed that GVSU rally financial support for scholarships for Salvadoran students. As the majority of Salvadoran youth are unable to complete high school, or bachierata as it is known in El Salvador, due to economic hardship, scholarships would be developed that would support students from the rural village of Santa Marta to complete their secondary education. It was also proposed that further scholarships be developed that would support university study in El Salvador or foreign study, for students who achieved graduation. This kind of economic support would also further a relationship of solidarity by using education as a tool to level the playing field. Promoting the education of Salvadoran nationals contributes to a higher level of knowledge and ability within that country, and thus decreases the need for outside support, or “service”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When American students come home, it is crucial to the service learning partnership that the Salvadoran expectation of solidarity be honored. Solidarity requires critical reflection, public action, on-going communication. In addition to personal critical reflection about the conditions they witness in El Salvador, and such reflection about the power relationships inherent in the “service” relationship, students need to be required to uphold their end of the partnership by sharing Salvadoran stories at home, and to *act* on their behalf. Action is the piece that has the potential to transform the hierarchical service relationship into one of partnership and solidarity, by seeking to change the conditions that perpetuate inequality and a need for service.

It is recommended that solidarity be integrated into the course design and curriculum in the following ways:

Study of activism. As a part of the initial student orientation, reading material and discussion specifically relevant to solidarity, social action and activism should be included and focused upon. The study of activism should be

included in this orientation and throughout the course, as a primer for understanding Salvadoran community organizing and action, as well as to equip students with the tools to undertake such action themselves. Several texts that could be useful in this study are The Activist's Handbook (Shaw, 1996), Rules for Radicals (Alinsky, 1971), The Global Activist's Manual (Prokosch & Raymond, 2002), The Power of the Poor in History (Gutierrez, 1979), and Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970).

Moving students from private citizens to public citizens. In order to fulfill Salvadoran expectations of partnership and solidarity, Grand Valley students need to be required to move from being private citizens to becoming public citizens. Taking a stand *publicly* on an issue is powerful. Engagement in public life is the foundation of democracy. For these reasons students should be required, as a matter of course to take their experience, the stories that were entrusted to them, the reality that they were witness to, and to share those things in a public way. Suggestions for action include the following: publishing a paper in a journal, making a presentation at a local club or church, staging a demonstration, starting a campaign, fundraising, writing a letter to the editor or hosting a series of dinner parties. Of course, this is just a list of suggestions, to which students could add a number of projects. Students would be required to develop a public action, to be approved by faculty, and to briefly report back on that action to fellow students, faculty, and to the Salvadoran hosts and stakeholders (possibly by way of a newsletter of compiled actions or website). Reading relevant to the public action chosen (i.e. theory of activism, organization strategy, etc.) should be integrated as a part of the student's project.

Continual Community Evaluation. Through this research, GVSU has established a foundation from which to build a deeper, more mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship. Continued communication in the form of regular and on-going community-based program evaluation will ensure that the GVSU School of Social Work program continues to develop toward a mutually established vision, with mutually beneficial goals.

CONCLUSION

By interviewing Salvadoran stakeholders and gathering program assessments from these program hosts, Grand Valley has taken a great step toward cultivating a true partnership with the people of El Salvador. Using this assessment, Grand Valley now has the opportunity to more fully evaluate the program in order to ensure its alignment with the philosophical underpinnings of service learning pedagogy. Now that Grand Valley can hear the voices of Salvadoran stakeholders, those voices can contribute equally to the evaluation of the program, just as partners' voices should.

Salvadoran stakeholders provided a number of suggestions and recommendations that can be used to improve Grand Valley's program in El

Salvador. These suggestions will be very valuable in the further development of this program. The greatest realization of this research, however, is that of the Salvadoran desire for a relationship of solidarity with Grand Valley students and faculty. This finding has ramifications that could potentially alter the philosophy and purpose of service learning. To engage in a relationship of solidarity with the Salvadoran people will see partnership to its fullest potential, through committing to work together in order to challenge the structures that place Salvadoran partners in need of service, at all.

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Table 1. Salvadoran Community Stakeholders and Interviewees

Name of Interviewee	Position
Aida	Middle-aged peasant woman from a rural village who has hosted students in her home for five years. Aida has served as the coordinator for students' visits to her village by arranging home-stays, cooking meals and organizing presentations for students by local groups. Aida also serves as a narrator to students of the horrific story of war and repression in her small village.
Zuima	Member of a host family for five years, and the youth committee director in her rural village. As a teenager, Zuima has a unique perspective on her village's

	history, its current situation and Grand Valley's program.
Delmy	Director of nonprofit agency whose mission is the protection of children's rights. This agency focuses particularly on the rights of children workers and street children. Delmy's organization hosts students in service placements and has been involved with the Grand Valley program for 3 years.
Lorena	Director of a parish outreach program in what is known as the poorest community in San Salvador. This parish works to meet the needs of the community through a daycare program, health and vision clinics, drug rehabilitation program, adult education and a seniors program. Lorena's parish hosts students in service placements and has been involved with the Grand Valley program for 3 years.
Susana	Social worker from a former host organization whose mission is advocacy for street children. Susana's organization was involved as a host agency for the Grand Valley program for 3 years.
Ciro	Director of a government agency for the protection of minors. Giro's agency hosts students in service placements and has been involved with the Grand Valley program for 5 years.
Romeo	Director of a government agency for the protection of minors. Giro's agency hosts students in service placements and has been involved with the Grand Valley program for 5 years.
Cristina	Director of a popular radio station, run entirely by community members and volunteers. Students visit the radio station, learn about the place of communication within the history of El

	Salvador, and produce public service messages to be aired on the radio station. Cristina has been involved with the Grand Valley program for 5 years.
Damion	Owner of guest house in which GVSU students have stayed for the past 5 years, and former FMLN organizer.
Carolina	Co-owner of guest house in which GVSU students have stayed for the past 5 years, and former FMLN organizer.
Matt	American working in El Salvador for an organization that promotes youth activism and community organization. Matt has lived in El Salvador for 5 years and has been involved with the Grand Valley program for 3 years.

Table 2. Survey Instrument (in English)

1. Tell me about your experience hosting Grand Valley students.
2. How long have you been hosting Grand Valley students?
3. What first interested you in the Grand Valley program?
4. What are the reasons that you continue participating in the Grand Valley program?
5. What has been the greatest or most important benefit to your organization as a result of participating with the Grand Valley program?
6. What has been the biggest problem in participating?

7. Describe the typical activities in which Grand Valley students have participated with your organization.
8. What have Grand Valley students learned from your organization?
9. What has your organization learned from Grand Valley students?
10. If you could make a change in the program for the future, what would it be?
11. How can Grand Valley better prepare students to take advantage of the opportunities for learning in El Salvador?
12. Describe any other ideas that you have for strengthening the relationship between Grand Valley and your organization.

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