

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Global-Service Learning and Student-Athletes: A Model for Enhanced Academic Inclusion at the University of Washington



Holly M. Barker, MA, PhD
Seattle, WA

Abstract

BACKGROUND The University of Washington (UW) continues to create opportunities to engage all students in transformational undergraduate educational opportunities, such as study abroad.

OBJECTIVE This article describes specific efforts to increase inclusion for student-athletes in study abroad, particularly for first-generation students, including low-income students of color. Given the overrepresentation of students of color in sports vis-à-vis the larger student body at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), like UW, service-learning in communities beyond campus boundaries provides opportunities to apply international learning to a local context and to create a continuum of learning.

METHODS By coupling educational theories from the classroom—particularly theories related to power and privilege—with community-based leadership in local communities, students are better prepared to actively engage in improving their own institutions. During the summers of 2013, 2014, and 2015, the author was the instructor for study abroad courses to French Polynesia with student-athletes. The courses were for 12 days (10 days on the ground and 2 days of flying), the maximum time that football players could be away from required summer workouts. This paper examines student evaluations from the French Polynesia trip in 2015.

FINDINGS Student-athlete evaluations of a study abroad experience underscored: the transformative impact of study abroad to their academic, social, and athletic lives; the benefit of creating family-like relationships outside the confines of their sport; an appreciation for the many forms where indigenous knowledge resides, such as in navigation, dance, fishing, weaving, and cooking; intense feelings of culture shock upon return to the US, even when the trip is short in duration; a desire to engage with the diverse communities in Seattle beyond the scope of the program's structure, and; frustration, particularly for the male student-athletes, about the ways coaches, family, and friends wanted to frame the study abroad experience as a tourist experience in the South Pacific. In this regard, the student-athletes encountered stereotypes from their own communities that framed Oceania as a place for tourism, and student-athletes as uninterested in deep engagement with research and theory—stereotypes that the student-athletes resist.

CONCLUSIONS This paper explains how the findings, coupled with Hartman and Kiely's theories for global service learning (GSL), lead to recommendations for strengthening the future connections between global and local learning for students.

KEY WORDS student-athletes, predominantly white institutions (PWI), oceania, indigenous epistemologies, stereotypes

The class was not restricted to student-athletes, but the short timeline coupled with the expense of overseas travel meant that non—student-athletes opted for programs with a longer duration.

INTRODUCTION

Why Student-Athletes? The author, together with Ink Aleaga and Liberty Bracken, colleagues in UW's Student-Athlete Academic Services (SAAS), developed the study abroad program to French Polynesia prior to the publication of Hartman and Kiely's model¹ for global service learning. In French Polynesia, students were enrolled in an anthropology course taught by the author to understand the ways power, privilege, and colonialism combine differently for indigenous and nonindigenous communities in a country that is currently colonized by France.

The author's motivation for approaching SAAS staff about creating a study abroad to French Polynesia emerged from conversations with 3 Polynesian football players who excelled in the classroom and at research. These 3 students lamented the fact that their football schedule prevented them from participating in study abroad programs, as they voraciously consumed coursework at UW related to indigenous knowledge, language, and culture in Oceania but never had opportunities to participate in study abroad, which would support travel outside the United States and/or to their ancestral region.

As staff members in SAAS, Ink and Liberty worked with football and other coaches to identify windows for travel and to identify a possible time frame for the trip. Since the program began as an opportunity to explore opportunities for outstanding Polynesian students to deepen their education through fieldwork and study abroad in Oceania, Ink and Liberty initiated discussions with the football team. At the time of the first French Polynesia program, Pacific Islander students constituted approximately 0.7% of UW's entire student body but were overrepresented on football as nearly 20% of the team. For faculty interested in improving educational opportunities, including graduate school preparation, for Pacific Islanders, there is no avoiding athletics.

Men of color who are both underrepresented in research and graduate school as well as overrepresented in revenue-generating athletic activities for PWIs deserve greater support to ensure that they have opportunities to optimize their educational benefits. Scholarships, after all, constitute a university's side of its exchange with student-athletes who

contribute significant economic and other benefits to the university through athletic labor. Since many student-athletes in contact sports suffer injuries and most do not have an opportunity to play professionally, it is even more important to ensure that their education is not simply about earning a degree but preparing student-athletes to engage in the economy, to be productive contributors to their own communities after graduation, and to maximize social mobility opportunities for the students and their families.

Timing was crucial to the establishment of UW's study abroad programs with student-athletes. Some of the factors influencing the timing of the French Polynesia trip included: final exam schedules and the start of summer football workouts, availability of community liaisons at the host site, as people engage in other economic activities beyond hosting students (eg, people who are employed as teachers or in tourist-related activities in addition to our program), scheduling of medical care and/or surgeries for sports-related injuries, parenting responsibilities of university people during nonacademic parts of the year, and the availability and costs of international flights.

Study abroad programs have exponentially more moving parts than classroom-based learning and therefore are challenging to replicate from year to year. Even study abroad programs to the same location in subsequent years depend on the schedules of the collective of student participants. Universities also need to ensure that they take steps to reduce burdens on host communities; even when learning is reciprocal and desired by host communities, engagement with a group of college students is exhausting and disruptive to community life.

Study abroad coursework that includes service learning can also give student-athletes leadership experience in locations that better resemble their home communities than PWI campuses. If a college education is intended to prepare students for employment and leadership, it is important that students have firsthand experience translating their coursework into daily practice. For the student-athletes in revenue-generating sports who are the target for UW study abroad opportunities, many of the students come from low-income neighborhoods.

Because students receive academic credit for study abroad, student-athletes' scholarships usually pay for the cost of the international learning. Many student-athletes have never had international travel and learning opportunities, and even sports

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