

# TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING, STUDY ABROAD, & GLOBAL SERVICE-LEARNING IN COSTA RICA/NICARAGUA: PROGRAM PARTNER AND HOST COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

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## Abstract

The transformative learning theory suggests that students' educational experiences in and outside of the classroom cause disorienting challenges that result in changes in their frames of reference that lead to enriching the meaning of their experiences and, therefore, enhancing their education beyond basic content acquisition. It has been suggested that study abroad excursions with service-learning components offer students transformative learning that develops their critical thinking capacity in terms of their individual selves and the societies around them.

As students concerned with personal responsibility towards social justice, we believe that service, social responsibility, and cultural sensitivity are of utmost importance. Moreover, we have all completed service-learning projects abroad and have benefitted personally and educationally from the transformations that it initiates.

## Methods

To test the hypothesis that study abroad excursions with service-learning components offer transformational learning, we gauged students' preliminary and posterior opinions on their personal educational and study abroad experiences. We created and distributed 64 surveys and collected and assessed 24 of those surveys that contained quantitative and qualitative responses taken by pre-departure and post-returning studying abroad students. We also conducted two separate focus groups to gain students' qualitative perspectives.

## Methods continued

We proposed that that the responses would lead to the conclusion that study abroad experiences coupled with service-learning projects offer students challenging experiences and changes in frames of reference that can be characterized as personally and educationally transformative.

## Online Survey

The online survey was collected using Qualtrics survey software distributed via email. The survey contained both demographic variables as well as validated scales from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), used to gauge students' perceived transformations abroad and what initiated these transformations. Mostly quantitative variables were used as measures, such as NSSE variable items measuring Higher-Order Thinking, Integrative Thinking, and Reflective Thinking, although participants were often given space to write in qualitative elaborations.

## Online Survey Results

While abroad 87.5% of surveyed students experienced a time when they felt their values, opinions, beliefs, or expectations were changing. 85.7% of those students said a person abroad influenced that change.

Experiencing this change in values, opinions, beliefs, or expectations significantly correlated with:

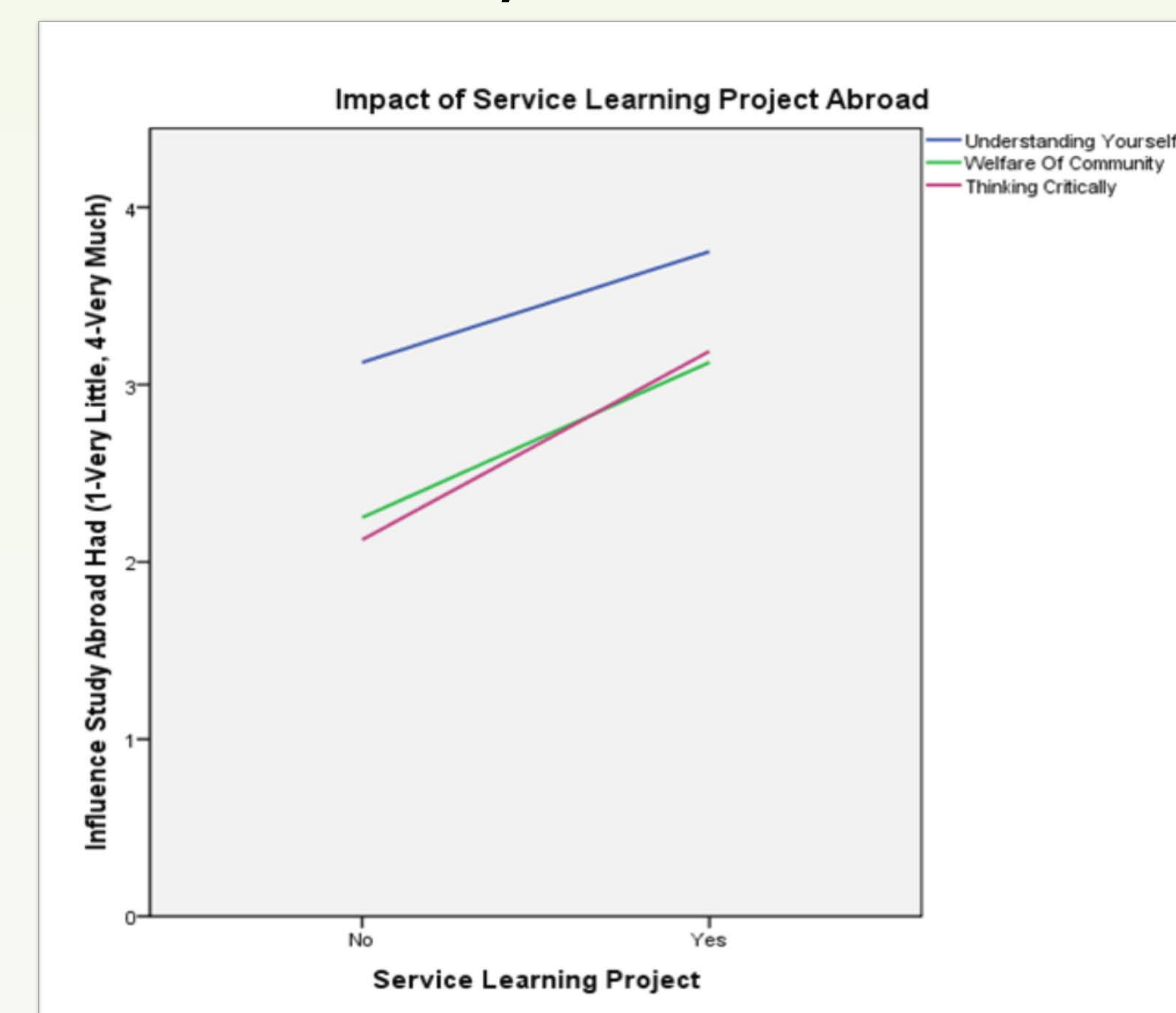
- Developing a personal code of values and ethics  $F(1,23) = 8.11, p < .05$
- The student understanding themselves  $F(1,23) = 15.84, p < .001$

## Online Survey Results

- Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds  $F(1,23) = 9.32, p < .05$
- Thinking critically and analytically  $F(1,23) = 6.16, p < .05$
- Trying to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective  $F(1,23) = 4.783, p < .05$
- Engaging in reflective learning  $F(1,23) = 5.05, p < .05$

Engaging in a service learning project abroad correlated with:

- Having a better understanding of the concept of welfare of the community  $F(1,23) = 4.08, p < .05$
- Students' understanding of themselves  $F(1,23) = 2.08, p < .05$
- Thinking critically and analytically  $F(1,23) = 8.65, p < .005$



## Focus Group

To gain more qualitative perspectives from the students that were surveyed, we organized 2 focus groups that would allow for students to share their experiences related to the questions posed in the survey. The 12 students and 1 study abroad adviser were asked to share details of their study abroad and service-learning experiences.; many of the students and the adviser described accounts that suggest their personal transformation.

## Focus Group Results

The following are quotes that suggest transformation:

"For me it has been a couple of years since I have studied abroad, so I think I have incorporated those things [that I had learned abroad] into my life; like [my] interest in Latin America, [my] LAS major, working with La Sed and keeping that stuff alive, living with all these people in my house in Eau Claire that have studied abroad and went on this same trip. I have incorporated everything in my life."

"As an advisor I noticed it right away, I saw it once they stepped off the plane the wheels turning in their heads. [...] As an outsider I can really see it, for them they are like 'I am just being me,' but to me I am like 'you have no idea,' Even within the semester I have seen the changes, and if you look at what they are doing now it shows that the experience has impacted them. You can go through the roster and be like this person is working at this place because of their Costa Rican experience. So I definitely think it happens to everyone whether they know it or not it is just a matter of to what extent and what intensity."

## Conclusion

The survey and focus group responses suggest that students who participate in home-stay study abroad excursions and international service-learning projects almost always describe their own experiences as transformative and beneficial to their educational and personal development.

## References

- National Survey of Student Engagement (2011). NSSE 2011 demographic variables.
- National Survey of Student Engagement (2011). NSSE 2011 validated scales.

