



Short-Term Study Trips in the Americas: Pedagogy and Logistical Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

Using a case study, this paper explores the pedagogy and logistical best practices of leading short-term study trips to the indigenous highlands of Guatemala. The goals of community-engagement are to have students: 1) interact with people of different cultural, linguistic, political, and economic world views, expanding their range of diversity-training; and 2) think critically about poverty and human agency in a global context. Logistical considerations are a key component of the learning experience when markets suffer from asymmetric information and moral hazard. This paper contributes to the literature by highlighting the ways that planning, programming, and logistics need to be woven into sustainable approaches to community engagement. For this to be an ethical endeavor, local peoples should be involved with the development and execution of the program. A barrier to learning can be a perception by students that, given their comparative economic privilege, they are there to “help” poor families. Students learn from host families about a different and holistic worldview, and gain insights into business development and its barriers. After the trip, students have a new way of thinking about diversity, agency, and workable approaches to ethical and sustainable self-help business developments.

KEYWORDS

Short-term study trips; community engagement; service learning; Central America; business education

1. Introduction and rationale

The allure of studying in a different culture, and learning business concepts along the way, is a magnet for attracting student interest. This is particularly true when the destination is exotic, such as a remote Mayan village, where students engage in a community service project that lifts up impoverished families. What should faculty members know before embarking on such a short-term study abroad trip? This paper provides an overview of the logistical steps involved in planning and executing such a trip, with the goal of improving the interactions between students and the indigenous host community. In particular, the paper points to weaknesses in planning that can result in shallow experiences, or worse, ethical breaches in how indigenous

people are treated in the endeavor. Integrating the analysis of logistical methods with learning objectives makes sense when the subject under study is complex, fraught with problems of asymmetric information, and open to moral hazards. Learning is equally about “how” to do a service engagement trip as well as “what” to see and do.

Business schools strive to achieve diverse accreditation goals, such as emphasizing the values of “inclusion and diversity, a global mind-set, ethics, social responsibility, and community” (AACSB 2018, 1). Many of these goals can be developed through trips that take students off-campus and even out of the country (Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner 2014). Trips can be linked to courses in management, marketing, international trade, economic development, political economy, poverty, labor, or other classes within or outside business, economics, and other disciplines.

Students learn from host families about a different worldview and gain insights into small business expansion. Psychologically, students come to realize that the typical preconception that indigenous peoples are helpless or ignorant is naïve and damaging. In particular, students come to see that “helping” others by giving away resources creates long-term dependency and low self-esteem. After these trips, students have a new way of thinking about poverty and workable approaches to self-help business developments and trade. “Service-learning” is a phrase often used to describe student activities that involve donating time for community goals. For reasons discussed below, we prefer to use the phrase “community-engagement,” which better describes the way in which partner communities give back to students. Sharing is a two-way street in this model, and students and participating families are co-creators of the mutual benefits.

Developing a successful study trip abroad, particularly one that involves a community-engagement component, requires local knowledge and assistance. Two of the authors of this paper have created and led study tours in Guatemala and other countries for 28 years through a nonprofit entity, the Highland Support Project (HSP), that they founded. The third has been a college faculty liaison for HSP trips. Over the past 10 years, HSP has serviced over 2,900 short study trip participants, about half of which were college students. Students came from 24 universities across 7 states, mainly in the mid-Atlantic region. The share of college students averages about 50%, but varies widely year-to-year. Predicting participants is difficult because of student demand factors as well as faculty supply considerations. Financial constraints can affect student demand in two ways: short-term study tours are generally less expensive than a full semester abroad, making it a more attractive foreign experience when the economy is in recession. On the other hand, students may decide to skip any foreign travel in a downturn. Faculty members also face constraints on their abilities or desires to lead such a trip, including teaching loads, sabbatical leaves, and department service

obligations. The recent coronavirus situation (along with other State Department warnings) can lead to trip cancellations or rescheduling, as in 2020. These are usually temporary situations and the desire for global travel with an educational component will likely remain strong and compelling.

A larger issue for short-term study abroad trips is the changing landscape of campus administrators overseeing International Education, and the desire to bring planning and logistics in-house to generate revenue, especially as state budgets grow tighter. After a high of 327 student participants in 2013, some faculty members were mandated by campus administrators to use in-school logistics providers as a way to capture funds. Cutting out local logistics providers may be short-sighted for two reasons: it can hurt instructional quality, and it may raise ethical concerns regarding the way indigenous communities are targeted. Trips that simply “show up” to indigenous villages to sightsee can potentially do harm psychologically and economically. Partner families are not animals in a zoo to be gawked at, they are people to be interacted with as equals. In-village programming should ensure that host families develop long-term relationships with a provider so that host family members feel in control of planning and accountability, and projects reflect the preferences of the community, not a donor or visitor (no matter how well meaning). For example, student groups that raise funds to bring needed medical supplies to a village may unintentionally put a local pharmacy out of business. This interaction does not create sustainable development, but rather dependency.

This paper presents an advance in thinking about the relationships between the logistics of short-term study trips, the learning outcomes, and the ethics of how faculty and logistics leaders plan and execute trips with the active participation of indigenous communities. The paper proceeds as follows: [Section 2](#) develops the pedagogical rationales and practical realities of integrating a trip into an academic program. The importance of pre-trip preparation is addressed in [section 3](#) and a sample trip presented in [section 4](#). Logistics, costs, and best practices are explored in [section 5](#). A review of learning objectives, recent evaluations, and challenges are addressed in [section 6](#), with the conclusions in [section 7](#).

2. Pedagogical considerations

Two pedagogical movements captured the attention of university teachers over the past few decades: One calls for teachers to situate learning in a global context, with a push to get students abroad to develop intercultural competence, a global mind-set, or global “citizenship,” admitting that these terms can be murky concepts (Streitwieser and Light 2009). Assessing student outcomes is likewise a difficult endeavor, but improving (Streitwieser et al. 2019). Developing intercultural competency might focus on developing

“respect, listening, curiosity, self- and other awareness, reflection, sharing, empathy, and relationship building” (Deardorff 2020, 13). A second movement calls on faculty to use “active” learning strategies that engage a different part of a student’s mind. David Kolb, for example, argues that “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (2015, 49).

The theory of experiential learning overturns traditional modes of thinking because the elements of consciousness are not thought to be constant or reliable enough that they can be transmitted and understood solely in terms of fixed outcomes of learning. The process thus matters:

If ideas are seen as fixed and immutable, then it seems possible to measure how much someone has learned by the amount of these fixed ideas the person has accumulated . . . Experiential learning theory however, proceeds from a different set of assumptions. Ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience . . . Learning is an emergent process (Ibid.).

An “emergent process” implies that the journey is as important as the destination. This is why logistics play a pivotal part in the unfolding of a successful trip experience.

Intercultural service learning addresses not only service learning, but also cultural learning (Rauschert and Byram 2018). The “community” now stretches from the student’s home campus to the indigenous village. New problems emerge, including the need to plan to avoid “hierarchical structures” and the need to prepare students in advance for basic intercultural sensitivity and competence. Community engagement can achieve multiple objectives (McGoldrick and Ziegert 2012). The advantages of active learning over passive classroom lecturing are that in a real-life context, the environment cannot be controlled. There is novelty in interaction, and a “transaction” of sorts between the student and the environment (Kolb op. cit., 45). Students’ emotions are heightened, and empathetic feelings trigger long-term retention because of associated meanings (Gadotti and Torres 2009). John Dewey, with his daughter Evelyn, had this perceptive insight: “No book or map is a substitute for personal experience; they cannot take the place of the actual journey” (cited in Hettler 2015, 357).

Short-term study abroad trips have strengths and weaknesses with regard to intercultural service learning. Niendorf and Alberts (2017) point to several possible issues that have led to mixed results. A key problem is that trips that do not specifically structure active engagements with locals may lead to students clustering with each other, producing a “bubble” effect (Peluffo 2019). This can be a problem even with longer term study abroad. While full immersion is the gold standard for intercultural training, short-term trips have also been found to be effective based on some impact measures (Paige and Fry 2010). Short-term trips can fill a niche in a wider educational program, serving

students who, for various reasons, are unable or unwilling to undertake a semester study abroad experience. This cohort could include student-athletes, students with limited financial means, students with limited scheduling flexibility, and students deterred because of rules or other academic or personal barriers. Thus, “short-term programs may be viewed as crucial for achieving broad and more egalitarian access to study abroad for U.S. undergraduates” (Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner 2014, 142).

According to a study of over 12,000 students from 22 universities, Paige and Fry (2010, 12) found that those who did study abroad found it to be, “the most impactful aspect of their undergraduate experiences and perceived as being far important than any other aspect of their undergraduate experience.” Surprisingly, the *duration* of the study abroad experience did not seem to matter, except with regard to foreign-language assimilation. In short:

What really counts is not how long you stay or where you go, but the quality of the program and the nature of deep cultural and learning experiences provided If done in the right way, short-term study abroad can have impact (Ibid., 13).

Unless the trip is created for a single course, a faculty leader will usually advertise the opportunity widely across both business and arts and sciences students. Short trips can be integrated within an existing course or offered as a stand-alone for-credit or non-credit experience. Students often want the incentive of academic credit for doing “extra” work, but this is neither necessary or always desirable. In terms of flexibility and accessibility, some combination of options can be offered. For example, students in any international business course or related courses could be offered a trip that supplements the regular coursework, taken during winter or spring break, in May, or during the summer. Academic credit comes with a price tag, and not all students want or need the credit. Those receiving credit would be expected to do more work, such as leading class discussions, writing pre- and post-trip journal reflections, writing research papers, or organizing public talks once back to campus. These assignments can vary in length and number depending on the course units (or credit hours) involved.

3. Pre-trip preparations

Faculty members should generally start their preparations at least 6 months in advance, although circumstances might align to allow a shorter timeframe. A sample timeline for arranging a trip is shown in Table 1, with key deadlines shown for receiving deposits, starting pre-trip meetings, and so on. Faculty members should coordinate with the International Studies office on campus to ensure that university guidelines are followed. A logistics provider should be secured who can help with planning, advertising, and pre-trip meetings. For a March trip that coincides with students’ spring break, starting in early fall is

Table 1. Sample timeline for planning a march 15 trip.

October 15	Identify the destination; consult relevant academic administrators; consult relevant faculty with expertise; consult a logistics and programming provider.
November 15	Begin advertising the trip electronically, through fliers, or word of mouth in relevant classes. Alert students to need for passport.
December 15	Get required deposits (e.g., \$250) from each student. Logistics provider to purchase airfare and reserve lodging and ground transportation.
January 15	Receive payments for airfare. Begin weekly pre-trip meetings of 1–2 hours.
February 15	Receive final payments. Continue with weekly meetings.
March 15	Depart for Guatemala. During the trip, groups will meet generally every night for discussion, planning, and deeper immersion. See the Daily Plan in the text.
March 22	Return home.
March 29	Debrief students and administer assessments.

desirable, so that by mid-January, most deposits are received and a weekly pre-trip meeting can begin.

Students should start well ahead of time to procure a passport, which generally takes 6–8 weeks (although an expedited passport can be obtained in 2–3 weeks for an extra fee). No visa is needed for Guatemala for a short-term stay. All students, whether receiving credit or not, are expected to attend all the pre-trip preparation sessions. This is essential for the safety, cohesion, and success of the experience. Special arrangements can be made for students who cannot attend these meetings. Students should hear from faculty with relevant regional expertise, university administrators with responsibilities for international education, and program and logistics organizations. Handouts should include practical items about safety, health, money, travel concerns, packing tips, as well as readings on history, culture, and language.

Average American students are often uninformed about Central American countries, and in particular about marginalized communities within those societies. There is a knowledge gap, and more importantly, a psychological gap, that initially prevents students from gaining an insider's perspective of what it means to carry out business development projects in a different and challenging context. Local values and practices can be quite different from what students expect. Pre-trip meetings can begin to prepare students for this different mind-set that awaits them on the journey. So much on the ground will be new to students that it is useful for them to arrive with some handholds of familiarity on history, culture, and economic conditions. Pre-trip learning provides the leverage for deeper interactions in the country.

In the case of the highlands of Guatemala, indigenous peoples have been repressed historically, starting with the Spanish conquest 500 years ago. Subjugation took the form of land seizures, workers enslaved, villages destroyed, the Mayan languages eradicated in schools, and other practices that seem abhorrent by today's sensibilities. A violent civil war raged from 1960 to 1996. The central government still largely represents the interests of descendants of Spanish conquerors, and indigenous peoples remain politically weak at the national level, despite constituting 40–60% of the population

(Pallister 2013, 121). While ostensibly a democracy, state repression in Guatemala continues (Amnesty International 2020). This includes forms of censorship, physical intimidation, and economic exploitation through the creation of political and market barriers. Federal policies are often crafted by special interests tied to foreign multinationals, such as mining companies.

Students may be surprised to learn that most Latin American countries do not have a homogenous Hispanic culture that can be studied as a singular unit. Rather, a diversity of languages and cultures exist within most countries, and these produce economic and political ramifications. Within Guatemala, 25 languages are officially recognized, and geographic isolation results in high transaction costs. While Spanish is sometimes a commonality for commerce, many indigenous peoples do not speak or write it. Mayan culture, which the central government attempted to eradicate, has substantially different values than the traditional Western mind-set. In particular, a social attitude links people to their place in the wider cosmos; the focus is on communal links, not individual gains (Blevins, Ramirez, and Wight 2010).

One final pre-trip preparation deals with addressing expectations. Why are students going on this trip? Some may simply want an adventure, experiencing something different. For many students, however, they sincerely want to “help” others who are seen as less fortunate. While altruism is sometimes disparaged by economists in the classroom, it is alive and well in the minds of students. Students will often be shocked to see the degree and depth of poverty in a Central American country, and will naturally feel compassion and want to help. Faculty should lead students in a dialog about what will help and what will hurt local villagers. Section 4 discusses the best practices of community engagement where there are great differences in power and economic relationships between residents and short-term visitors. Students should be alert to not mistake material deprivation for psychological or cultural deprivation. A key point of visiting a highlands of Guatemala village is to experience the richness of family and community life, and appreciate the sense of belonging, and the oneness with others in the community that residents feel. Students should explore why the mind-set of humbleness is the preferred starting point for community engagement, and recognize that they have much to learn from locals. Students must transcend feelings of pity to recognize the agency of villagers and the reciprocal learning that comes from genuine empathy (Anderson, Dore-Welch, and Johnson 2019).

4. A typical trip

A study trip works on several levels, each serving a purpose. At the most basic level, students want to experience something different – the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of a new encounter. Informal meetings with indigenous peoples in their homes can serve these initial functions. This arouses their

curiosity and students will begin a critical-thinking processing of trying to understand not just “what” is different, but “why” it is different. When possible, educationally engaging experiences can and should involve locals who provide needed expertise. These depend on the particular focus of the course and needs of the instructor and students. A good short-term study trip develops both curiosity-building and critical-thinking learning strategies, with appropriate breaks for reflection and relaxation.

The long rides to and from the indigenous areas afford students the chance to talk with van drivers, who operate their own small businesses. By the end of a trip, students report feeling attached to drivers, who go out of their way to make the trip rewarding. Off the van, many students know enough Spanish to get by, and Mayans who sell in the larger markets can generally speak Spanish. In smaller markets and in villages, many Mayans do not speak Spanish, so HSP provides each team with a translator (who is also a community facilitator) who can communicate in English, Spanish, or indigenous languages. Students may pick up some few words of K'iche' (or Quiché), but the serious interactions of students with family members will require the assistance of the translator/community facilitator. The openness of Mayan people to sharing can have unnerving effects on trip participants. After one interaction, a participant began to cry. He explained that he had been completely unaware of the inner life of Mayans, and had never really noticed them, even though back in the U.S. they did yard work and cleared his table. He had a sudden Gestalt perception switch on encountering a village elder who he now saw as wise; his previous unexamined view was that Mayans were poor because of personal qualities like laziness or incompetence. This personal transformation would not have been likely without the scheduling of time to talk with villagers, and without the provision of translators.

An example of a Daily Plan in Guatemala for HSP trips would be as follows:

Day 1. Students fly into Guatemala City and are transported by vans to the western highlands, which will take several hours. An overnight stay at Panajachel, on Lake Atitlán, allows for easy acculturation and an orientation session in a serene, natural setting.

Day 2. After a local breakfast that might include fried plantains with cinnamon, students are taken to a cooperative where they meet and talk with indigenous weavers. This business was started to provide widows with a means of survival and purpose after their village was destroyed in the civil war. Students study production, labor supply, and entrepreneurship within a business model they likely have not studied. Many of these weavings are exported to the United States and sold in an HSP-affiliated retail store as well as on-line. Expanding the size of the market through trade is a key lesson for students to learn about increasing living standards in poor areas.

Students continue on to the famed marketplace at Chichicastenango, where 99% of the population is K'iche' Mayan. Vendors sell a variety of local

handicrafts, such as textiles, masks, pottery, incense, wood boxes, herbal remedies, candles, small tools, locally raised animals (chickens and pigs), and all manner of foodstuffs. The diversity and competition of products, buyers, and sellers bears discussion, and students may be surprised to learn that implicit rules of the market are different from economic textbook treatments. For example, high transaction costs of getting to the market from small mountain villages mean that natural monopolies tend to form in villages: there are high-fixed costs of operation relative to the low local demand. Social norms dictate that competition – opening a rival store in the village – is to be avoided, because it would raise overall costs and be destructive of village harmony (Blevins, Ramirez, and Wight 2010). There is often one village bakery, one village pharmacy, and so on, and prices are not maximized to take advantage of that monopoly power. Violators of these norms would be social outcasts. Even when there are multiple producers in a village, such as weavers, sellers who trek from the village to the huge market at Chichicastenango are expected to carry and sell their competitors' wares along with their own. These customs interweave economic practices within a deep set of cultural norms that attempt to improve efficiency, reduce inequality, and enhance village cohesion.

A marketplace is considered sacred by the Mayans, because it offers opportunities for mutual assistance. A market exemplifies the interdependence that is the web of life. In Mayan philosophy, the idiosyncratic pricing of products is arrived at, not so much to maximize wealth, but to satisfy the energy balance. A rich buyer bargains – but not very hard – when the seller is poorer. Price discrimination is widespread in indigenous markets as a mechanism for redistributing resources to those less well off, without causing shame (Ibid.).

The intermixing of indigenous culture with Spanish conquest architecture and the Catholic Church's presence makes for interesting discussion over lunch. That evening students are transported to Quetzaltenango (also known as Xela), which is a modern city of 150,000 people, where they may stay in comfortable dorms at a retreat center. Alternatively, a highlands village community center can accommodate up to 50 people. That evening, an indigenous professor discusses Mayan religion, history, clothing, and cultural symbols, and fosters critical thinking by exploring student experiences about the market interactions of that day.

Days 3, 4, and 5. For the next three days, students travel to partner communities in the surrounding mountains, where they break into groups to pursue separate interests. Some students learn about public health issues related to childhood pulmonary diseases caused by indoor cooking fires. These students work under the direction of a professional mason to build a concrete block cookstove that will vent dangerous gases out of the home. Other students work on the Mayan Arts Project, which seeks to invigorate local culture and build community spirit. These students may teach an elementary school art class, and help design and paint a mural on a school wall. Other

students engage with women's circles (entrepreneurial self-help groups) to design new products for a North American market. At the end of each afternoon, students are transported back down the mountain to the retreat center where they have showers and eat dinner. Academic talks or cultural presentations will last 1–2 hours in the evening. These might cover human rights or corporate social responsibility issues.

Day 6. The morning is spent at a different cooperative, such as a blown glass factory, where again indigenous capital and labor have created an opportunity for exporting hand-crafted items. In the afternoon, students return to their host communities to finish their stoves or arts projects, or to assist with a nursery seeding to combat deforestation.

Day 7. Students travel to the ancient city of Antigua, well known on all tourist brochures. This is a day to unwind with unstructured activities. Museums, historic architecture, and tourist shops provide a re-introduction to a more Western life.

Day 8. Students are transported to the airport and fly home.

5. Costs, logistics, and best practices

5.1. Costs

HSP is a “boutique” small-scale service provider that customizes trips to the goals of the faculty member. Programming, housing, and other features will vary accordingly, along with the associated costs. As of spring 2020, a typical eight-day trip to an indigenous region of Guatemala, covering lodging in a dormitory, food, local transportation, and educational and cultural programming, averages about 1,000 USD for trips with at least 14 participants. Airfare adds another 550–750 USD, depending on the number in the group and timing. The average trip size is about 16 participants; leaders may break larger groups into smaller teams. Students are also generally required to buy travel insurance that would include health care in the country and emergency evacuation in extreme cases. This will usually cost 60 USD for a basic policy. Students should bring additional cash for tips, laundry services, tourist purchases, and incidentals.

5.2. Logistics

Table 2 outlines best practices to keep in mind. As noted above, pre-trip orientation meetings are essential for a safe and rewarding experience. Item 2 stresses the importance of having a trusted local partner to handle logistics. The institutional knowledge shared, and the scale opportunities provided, more than make up for the loss of autonomy and slightly higher costs (Anderson, Dore-Welch, and Johnson 2019, 343). Alternatively, using low-

Table 2. Best practices and HSP practices.

Best Practices	HSP Practices
1. Require pre-trip orientation programs to educate and prepare students.	Faculty members, in conjunction with HSP, provide pre-trip materials and lectures to orient students. Safety is a key concern. Setting expectations is important. Developing group cohesion is desirable.
2. Use trusted local provider to overcome problems of asymmetric information and moral hazard in provision of logistical services.	HSP partners with a local NGO in Guatemala (AMA) to contract for ground transportation, lodging, and food, in ways that align HSP interests with local interests for long run sustainability.
3. Provide students with pedagogically-approved, critical-thinking experiences, deepened by journal writing, assigned essays or research papers.	HSP partners with faculty members to ensure that students combine academic and theory learning with experiential learning.
3. Minimize shallow experiences in tourist locations that create or reinforce stereotypes.	HSP trips allocate the majority of time to non-tourist destinations.
4. Ensure the well-being of indigenous peoples and communities.	HSP partners with AMA to involve individuals from the communities in programming and planning and aligns HSP goals with those of the community, to ensure long run sustainability.
6. Require post-trip debriefing to discuss learning objectives and evaluate the trip.	Faculty members, in conjunction with HSP, provide post-trip meeting(s).

cost bidders for logistics and programming can be dangerous in some countries. Perils arise from the large and widespread evidence of asymmetric information and principle-agent problems that exist.

For example, most international airlines fly into the capital of Guatemala City. To get to the western highlands, a van or bus transportation is needed. A number of companies offer such services, but quality, and particularly safety, are an unknown factor when purchasing on-line without local knowledge. Given the rush of tourists at peak times (like spring break), travel agencies scramble to fill transportation requests. Low-cost providers may use older vehicles that are not well maintained, leading to breakdowns, and bald tires can result in accidents. Most troubling is that short-run incentives promote selfish behaviors rather than long-run relationships, and low-bid van drivers sometimes collude with thieves. The issues of safety and reliability apply equally to lodging and food services. Water-borne illnesses can be a problem for visitors to Central American countries. While there are good restaurants and hotels in larger tourist spots, these may be noticeably absent in rural areas, which is where indigenous study trips go. Being “off the beaten path” is indeed the objective of many trips, since the value-added of a stay in a tourist hub is low, and may reinforce stereotypes rather than break down cultural barriers.

In choosing a logistics partner, faculty should also consider how the vision, programs, and processes of third-party providers, whether for-profit or non-profit, fit with the goals of the course or program. Some logistics companies steer students to high tourist areas where retailers provide them with commissions. These are potentially shallow interactions that reinforce stereotypes. When visiting indigenous areas, community engagement should at minimum ensure the well-being of indigenous peoples and communities being visited. As discussed below, this is far more complex than simply handing out

resources or buying merchandise. In short, the main pedagogical reason for using a local logistics partner is to ensure that indigenous communities are involved in the planning and execution of the trip, and that incentives work to create processes for sustainable, long-term community development.

5.3. Best practices

To overcome the problems of asymmetric information and principle/agent incentives, HSP engages with a locally-run and affiliated nonprofit, Asociación de Mujeres del Altiplano (AMA, “Women of the Highlands”), which investigates and contracts with service providers. AMA provides loans to former and current police officers to enable them to purchase safe new vans, with radios and communications equipment. By helping start small and sustainable businesses, AMA earns the respect, trust, and loyalty of locals, who ensure the safety of HSP trip participants. AMA-funded police drivers know where thieves congregate and avoid those areas. Drivers also have a long-run economic incentive, as well as an emotional loyalty, to ensure the safety of HSP participants.

Quetzaltenango is a jumping-off point for working in indigenous villages. AMA contracts with a retreat center for dorm rooms, hires its own chef, buys, and cleans all the local food, and maintains a reputation for sanitation and reliability. Some HSP students do at-home village stays with families that are pre-inspected by AMA for cleanliness and safety.

While students come and go, AMA is a permanent fixture in the village community, creating an incentive-compatible relationship for long-run sustainability. HSP and AMA’s aims, as reflected in local programming, are to assist indigenous peoples in staying on their lands, in their communities, and with their culture. Poverty is often seen as a lack of human agency, by which is meant the capacity to make choices from a background condition of substantive well-being (Sen 2000). A key aspect of AMA’s work is to listen to how local families define their own objectives and goals, and to support them in their view of development. An outsider’s view of what poor people “need” or “want” can be misguided, driven by a Western worldview. This is particularly true of charity, which can degrade an indigenous family’s self-worth and social standing. Work and sacrifice are embedded into the Mayan cultural fabric, and an ethic of self-help is built-in to community engagement. HSP’s tag line is, “Hope, not dependency; opportunity, not charity” (HSP 2020). This captures the ethic of offering partner communities a helping hand, but not a hand out. The exceptions to this are times of emergency, such as an earthquake or a crop failure, in which urgent needs trump long-term sustainability issues.

Families that receive vented stoves work to gather and pre-position materials and tools (sand, concrete, blocks, pipe, and tools). Family members haul water and complete other chores during construction. Afterward,

recipient families donate time to advance community goals that provide positive spillovers (wells, sanitation, education, and so on). AMA pays masons the full amount of a stove construction cost, so that student volunteer labor does not inadvertently crowd out local labor earnings. It would be far cheaper for AMA to simply pay the mason to construct stoves than to pay for a group of volunteers to fly down from the U.S. to build the stoves. The students are not helping the family in an efficient way; rather, students are paying to experience the importance of self-help and the development of small business entrepreneurship. Local communities do not benefit from the sudden and irregular influx of foreign students unless there is a structure that provides protections for long-term growth. AMA works to involve indigenous families in the planning and execution of programming, in a way that strives to be mutually beneficial and sustainable.

6. Review of learning objectives, assessments, and challenges

6.1. Learning Objectives

Some general learning objectives have already been mentioned for students from business schools. These include practicing values of inclusion, diversity, a global mind-set, ethics, social responsibility, and community engagement. HSP's programs address these goals by engaging students with active learning experiences in indigenous communities. They explore the intersection of small business development and community well-being. Courses in economic development and international trade deal with issues of specialization and comparative advantage. Students see first-hand that global markets are important ways for people in marginalized communities to improve their standards of living. Textbook treatments of economic development or trade, however, often provide theoretical insights without guidance on how to overcome limitations on the ground. By spending time with indigenous artisans, students come to appreciate the difficulties of market access, capital formation, informational barriers, and other constraints and risks in starting and running a new business, particularly one that relies on international trade in non-traditional products. The logistical difficulties, whether because of language, transportation, government regulations, taxes, or other barriers, provide insights into supply chain problems in Latin American countries. Equally important are the lessons for businesses or nonprofits that engage in work with indigenous people. Contact and empathy with non-English or non-Spanish speaking people expands a business student's familiarity and comfort with diversity issues in the workplace, and with key concepts of poverty, human agency, and respect.

6.2. Assessments

As a final best practice, once back in the States, instructors should convene one or more meeting to debrief students, review learning objectives, and engage in critical reflection. Students should fill out anonymous assessments that will not be seen by the instructor until after all grades have been submitted. Maintaining an exchange of information and accountability will improve the experience over time.

Each faculty member is responsible for crafting an assessment instrument that deals with the specific learning objectives of their course. We do not have access to those surveys, since they are administered by others at the home campus after the trip. Evidence provided by repeat trips and repeat affiliations, however, shows that many faculties believe the trip provides a meaningful and rewarding learning experience. Of 86 HSP trip teams taken by universities since 2014, 79 (92%) were part of repeat trips; of 15 trips taken by high school teams, 100% were part of repeat trips; of 42 trips taken by nonprofit groups, 40 (95%) were part of repeat trips.

Anecdotal evidence also supports this conclusion. One student, after graduation, was hired by a big-four accounting firm. Over the next 8 years, he organized and led annual HSP trips with coworkers and student interns, because he witnessed the change in mind-set that occurred, including greater self-awareness, empathy, and critical reflection about global issues. Trips to Guatemala became a recruiting tool, signaling interest in diversity and helping students find personal meaning. A faculty member from a school of nursing at a mid-Atlantic university has likewise led annual trips for the past decade. The school amended its mission statement and strategic plan in 2016 to reflect HSP's values and model of development. The anecdotal evidence suggests that many faculty perceive a lasting educational impact of the trip.

Assessments of the logistical and programming elements provided by HSP and AMA are provided in [Table 3](#), from 29 trip participants who volunteered to complete a longer questionnaire in 2019. Student responses were highly positive, with an average satisfaction score of 4.8 on 10 quantitative questions,

Table 3. 2019 quantitative assessments (5 = Very satisfied; 1 = Very dissatisfied) (N = 29).

	Avg.	Min.	Max.
Q1: How satisfied were you with trip preparation and staff support before you left?	4.6	2.0	5.0
Q2: How satisfied were you with the ground transport?	4.9	4.0	5.0
Q3: How satisfied were you with the drivers?	5.0	4.0	5.0
Q4: How satisfied were you with your project?	4.8	4.0	5.0
Q5: How satisfied were you with the help from the local masons?	4.8	3.0	5.0
Q6: How satisfied were you with the food throughout the week?	4.7	2.0	5.0
Q7: How satisfied were you with the lodging?	4.8	3.0	5.0
Q8: How satisfied were you with the translators?	4.7	3.0	5.0
Q9: How satisfied were you with staff support during your trip?	4.9	3.0	5.0
Q10: How satisfied were you with the trip as a whole?	4.9	4.0	5.0
Average	4.8		

where 5 = Very Satisfied and 1 = Very Unsatisfied. Most students were satisfied with the pre-trip preparation (average score of 4.6), even though students have varying levels of experience and travel sophistication. Students were very pleased with the drivers who took them to and from airports and to villages on a daily basis, and every student but one gave this item a rating of 5. On the final question, “How satisfied were you with the trip as a whole?” the average score was 4.9, with no score below 4.0.

Qualitative responses were also often glowing, which is expected because of the emotional power of the location in the highlands of Central America and the interactions with indigenous people in their own communities. Using a template for categorizing qualitative information described by Grenier (2018), we recorded the top responses to a question about favorite aspects of the trip. Thirty-six percent of respondents thought the interactions with families in the community were the highlight, 29% liked the stove building or other project component, and the remainder liked the culture *per se*, working with other faculty and students, and tourism aspects. In terms of least favorite experiences, 45% of students commented about the sometimes arduous travel schedules. Others did not like the accommodations (because of barking dogs). Fifteen percent were disappointed that their project got behind schedule and they could not finish it themselves (in such cases stoves and other projects were completed with villager labor). Personal health issues bothered one in 10 students who responded, while emotional demands were mentioned by one. In terms of recommendations for improvement, more than a third of the students said the trip was perfect as it was. Nearly 25% offered suggestions on scheduling or timing of events. About 20% thought that aspects of the organization and communication could be improved. Fourteen percent suggested altering the choice of cultural events.

The final question simply asked respondents for any additional comments or personal reflections. It was not unusual for people to write that the trip was “eye-opening and enlightening,” and that “my heart is full of joy because of the people of Guatemala.” About 80% of the responses were along the lines of how the experience had been life-changing, “easily one of the best of my life.” Respondents overused the phrases “awesome,” “amazing,” and “incredible” to express feelings about the journey and the time with Mayan villagers. The trip was “well balanced with work, culture, learning, helping, and fun.” About 20% expressed gratitude and appreciation to the villagers and staff. For interested readers, a file containing all the qualitative responses is posted on-line.¹

¹“Qualitative assessments.2019.docx” at <https://tinyurl.com/QA2019-docx>. The authors acknowledge the valuable assistance of Robert F. Scherer in conceptualizing this section, and from several anonymous referees.

6.3. Challenges

One challenge for these trips is dealing with student expectations and attitudes that go beyond food and logistics. Students may want to see themselves as “heroes,” sacrificing time and money to travel a long way to “help” impoverished peoples. These attitudes are natural but constitute a barrier to engagement and learning. If the trip is successful, students will come to adopt a humbler approach, recognizing the limitations of outsider help, and the dangers that uneducated foreigners can do, such as in creating dependencies. Students come to appreciate what indigenous cultures can teach them about their own cultures, both positively and negatively. Mayan culture, in particular, may provide a mirror that exposes the pains of isolation and the need for belonging in the U.S. culture. Mayan culture is not now, nor has it ever been, fixed in a form that an anthropologist could put into a box. Mayan culture is evolving rapidly under global pressures, and individual Mayans may not reflect any stereotypes from articles or lectures. Having students converse directly with indigenous Mayans is an antidote to thinking superficially about people from a different culture who are on the surface quite different.

Another challenge is to maintain cohesiveness and positive attitudes within the group. Travel in countries with limited infrastructure is often subject to unexpected delays, such as when a storm causes road erosion and a detour route has to be taken. All timetables should be identified as “targets,” not obligations. Students should be reminded to expect schedule changes due to circumstances on the ground. Some students “go with the flow” more easily than others. Getting students to appreciate their own comfort levels with the unexpected, and learning to cope while maintaining a good attitude, is an important lesson for doing business in Latin America.

Students also differ in terms of their degrees of extroversion. Some students quickly mesh with others and gain a sense of identity from being part of the team. Others find it harder to connect, and may even feel left out. It is normal that students (even on the short trip here) can feel lonely, sad, or distant. The team leader should try to relate with every student, every day, to identify problems and to engage in team-building games that promote feelings of inclusion.

A final challenge is to get students to recall the learning objectives of community engagement. It is easy for students to become wrapped up in the actual services, such as stove-building or tree-planting, or with the extra-curricular activities, without recognizing or reflecting on the larger experiences. A strong and well-developed pre- and post-trip program, the requirement that students keep journals, write reflective essays, and attend in-trip seminars and post-trip discussion sessions, are all methods for emphasizing the learning aspects of the experience, above that of simply being in a novel environment. The spirit of critical thinking should dominate in the development of any program, and allow students to reach their own conclusions about the meaning of the trip for their own lives.

7. Conclusion

This paper provides a resource for faculty members in conceptualizing and executing a short-term community engagement trip to an indigenous region of Central America. Such trips can serve useful learning objectives in business, by preparing students to see with a more global perspective, to become more familiar with people of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, to experience poverty and human agency in a village setting, and to understand the ethical interaction of outsiders with locals. This paper demonstrates how trips are more successful when carried out with careful attention to pre-trip preparation, local logistical planning, appropriate in-country programming, and the encouragement of critical thinking at each step. The particular contribution of this paper is to identify how short-term trips can be done ethically when there are large differences in the background circumstances of students, faculty, and indigenous peoples, and when market failures arise from asymmetric information and moral hazard. An important consideration in future research is to analyze whether the learning objectives in particular courses are achieved by such interactions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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