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International Service Learning: An Overview

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Introduction. Healthcare disciplines including nursing, public health, occupational therapy, and physical therapy (PT) now recognize global health participation and education as a necessary component of healthcare education. Increasingly, students applying to and choosing which PT program to attend must now consider the design, purpose, benefits, and potential drawbacks of such a program in their education. This report seeks to provide a broad overview of International Service Learning (ISL), its benefits, potential concerns, and a brief comparison of the University of Puget Sound’s (UPS) pilot ISL program to the optimal model of an ISL in order to define possible areas of improvement.

Results. Pechak and Thompson recommend 7 components to create a program with positive outcomes (Table 1). Benefits include increased confidence, improved communication skills, increased world view, increased cultural competence, improved critical thinking, self-empowerment, independence, increased student self-assessment scores, increased experiential learning opportunities, and increased understanding and confidence in professional roles when ISL project includes cooperation with other professions. Ethical considerations that should be taken into account include the power dynamic between the community and those rendering services, the quality of care being provided, sustainability at the community and individual levels, and community need.

Discussion. By forming a relationship with HIM, the UPS ISL was able to address the lack of sustainability common to many ISLs. It has been observed that well-designed programs grasp that the relationship between the program and those it serves must be symbiotic, not simply serving one or the other. The UPS pilot ISL program met 6/7 components for optimal ISL outlined by Pechak and Thompson. Most notably absent was the use of an outcome measure to evaluate the service learning experience. This should be a tool utilized in future programs. Recommended improvements to the program include incorporating instruction to local care providers in order to increase the community’s self-efficacy, increased preparation in medical Spanish in the months leading up to the ISL program, and use of an outcome measure to evaluate program success.

Table 1. Seven components of an optimal international service learning (ISL) project and how the University of Puget Sound pilot ISL fulfilled each component.