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The Relationship Between Short-Term International Volunteer Work and Long-Term  
Community Involvement

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## **Introduction**

International community service work, known colloquially as volunteer tourism, has become popular in recent years as both an activity and subject of research. There is debate surrounding the costs and benefits of short-term service trips abroad, and there are no shortage of opinions surrounding the matter. A vast majority of academics in the field of tourism can agree that volunteer tourism has problematic practices. To briefly cite a few, volunteer tourism organizations can destabilize low-income communities by replacing local labor, neglecting service projects, or sustaining systems that allow for continued exploitation. There is also a clear sentiment that faith based international service organizations, or mission trips, are somehow less ethical and more problematic than non-faith based organizations of the like (Wearing 2015). With this debate between faith-based and non-faith-based international service organizations, the question then becomes, what makes one organization ‘better’ than the other?

‘Better’ is obviously a subjective term. Much of the research surrounding volunteer tourism is often gathered from the perspective of what kind of impact the organization may have on a community abroad. However, there is little research that examines the impact on the volunteers themselves. Moreover, how are individuals impacted by experiencing these trips themselves? Traveling as a teenager and observing poverty in such a lens that positions the traveler as the actor of change, *must* elicit some sort of impact on the individual. Moreover, it is impossible to not speculate how this volunteer work abroad could translate to their lives at home. Given that these trips usually surround an international volunteer project, this research will seek to better understand the relationship between short-term international service work and long-term community involvement.

The participants in this study are individuals who went abroad on a service trip between the ages of 13-18 and are now at least 20 years old, giving them at least two years to reflect upon their experiences. Age becomes critical for a multitude of reasons. Young minds are especially impressionable, and the conceptions of activism, poverty, and global awareness at that age are understood to make a lasting impact on the individual’s understanding of the world around them. More importantly, the connection between international service work and domestic community involvement will provide us with a critical understanding of transformative learning in adolescents. If we can isolate select variables across both types of international service organizations to pinpoint practices that influence an individual to obtain a sense of global awareness and community involvement, this will be crucial for our understanding of civic partisanship and global citizenship.

## **Literature Review**

For most service trips, whether they build a school, spend time at an orphanage, or work with the sick, it is obvious that people go on international service trips with some level of altruism. Now, whether or not the lessons learned abroad will transfer to the volunteers' own lives as they age, is not as easy of an assumption to make. In order to understand how increased, long-term community involvement is possible with short-term volunteer tourism, we must first understand community involvement itself.

### ***Defining Community Involvement***

It is true that physical acts of community service are an obvious example of community involvement, but the true definition of community involvement is much more nebulous and interpretive. Because it is unrealistic to expect enough young people to physically volunteer on a regular basis, we must adjust our baseline understanding of what regular community involvement looks like. The conventional and broad understanding of civic involvement is actually much too narrow, considering that it is not a realistic bar for many people. Youniss, McLellan, and Yates argue that instead of interpreting acts of physical service as ‘community involvement’, we ought to view these actions on a spectrum of ‘civic competency’. Civic competency refers to a spectrum in which individuals participate in their community, ranging from sporadic small scale actions to intensive regular participation (Shah, McLeod, and Lee 2009). In practice, this means that there is value in being a civically *minded* person, and in this sense, maybe one does not regularly volunteer at the animal shelter, but perhaps they go the extra mile to vote in local elections, or maybe encourage their friends to shop more sustainably. This model, as also elaborated upon by Adler, becomes much more tactile in including more individual behaviors on the spectrum of civic community action (Alder 2005). In other words, just because somebody does not regularly volunteer, this does not mean that they are not a civically minded or an active citizen.

### ***The Importance of Community Involvement and Service Learning***

Within the realm of community service work, there exists a large age disparity, and one in which the older generations tend to pull the weight. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, middle aged and retired adults are almost twice as likely to volunteer than their younger counterparts. However, within the last few decades, college admissions departments have begun favoring community service as a piece of a holistic application, which only in part explains why some teens are eager to hop on a plane and build a school in a developing country.

Not only are college admissions offices fueling the desire for teens to be civically engaged abroad, but many educational frameworks have come to value community service as an integral part in adolescent education. Service learning in K-12 and higher education has evolved to become part of many institution’s curriculum, citing that urban volunteering is critical to a holistic education and preparation for adult life (Waterman 2014, 124). What distinguishes service-learning from volunteering in general, is that service learning implies an inherent benefit to the individual doing the work. Often, service learning is implemented into educational programs in order to not only “cultivate responsible citizenship”, but also to advance the individual's understanding of community involvement (Sin 2009, 482). As we will come to see, the benefit to the individual will become the distinction between volunteer tourism and the wider scope of mass tourism. In their article titled “Engendering Civic Identity”, Youniss, Yates, and MacLellan posit that service work outside of one's own community is influential for adolescents because it not only introduces them to unfamiliar systems of operation, but it also encourages youth to understand community engagement as an integral piece in their developmental identity (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1997, 624).

Community service learning, whether it is carried out abroad or right at home, can be easily understood as a valuable piece of education for young people. However, for much of

American suburbia, many teens find themselves in what scholars are referring to as ‘civic deserts’ (Atwell, Bridgeland, and Levine 2017). The upper-middle-income suburbs all across the country that parents are eager to raise their kids in for the town’s intentional lack of crime or homelessness, essentially produce an environment with non-evident poverty and therefore a lack of opportunity for theatrical acts of community service. When teens from these upper middle-income suburbs find themselves in the need for some community service experiences to make their college application shine, it's no wonder why they pack their bags for Guatemala. Simply put, when the need for service work is not obvious but the action is still desired for the individual, the individual seeks opportunity outside of their environment. Combined with a lack of opportunity in their own communities, and the rise in popularity of volunteer tourism, international service work provides the perfect opportunity abroad. Not only is a well-rounded civic education likely to continue to be prioritized, but international service work shows no sign of slowing down anytime soon. With this in mind, we can dive deeper into the specific motives of volunteer tourism, and more specifically, how we can achieve long-lasting, productive impacts.

### ***Community Involvement as a Motive for Volunteer Tourism***

In the scope of tourism research, the question of why people travel in the first place remains a paramount question. Volunteer tourism in particular obviously presents different motives for traveling when compared with luxury or backpacking. With volunteer tourism, it is clear that travelers, especially young people, tend to set more altruistic motivations for their excursions abroad. Generally, scholars and travelers, agree that some of the key motives of volunteer tourism can be observed by a desire for self-development, alongside the desire to experience a cultural exchange or participate in an act of community development (Wearing and McGehee 2013, 122). The idea of global citizenship has also gained immense popularity, citing that an understanding of other cultures and walks of life are valuable personal experiences (de Andreotti 2014). When examining the correlative success of an individual's achieved motivations, community involvement is largely the most tangible and quantifiable variable. However, before we determine the effectiveness of volunteer tourism trips as prompting travelers to embody a long-term, sustained impact that prompts them to continually be involved in their own communities, we must first further explore the primary motivations of international service work as it relates to community involvement.

While the prospect of college admission may inspire some teens to go abroad and do some service learning during their summer vacations, gap years after college have also grown in popularity within the past thirty years. Even more so, the motive of gap years has changed. At the beginning of their popularity, much of the principle was to take time for leisure before beginning one's professional career. However, these days, gap years usually involve some sort of service experience and the goal of gap years is now largely to obtain the skills of global citizenship that would be *useful* for one's upcoming professional career (Holmlund, Liu, and Skans 2008) Despite the shift in personal objectives for taking a gap year, it is evident that the motive itself, whether or not a service task has occurred, is the ultimate motive in individual gratification. Still, the overarching principle of the allure in modern media for gap year traveling in general is geared towards the emerging ‘new moral tourist’. Coined by Butcher in the early 2000’s, the new moral tourist sets out to separate themselves from mainstream tourism by depicting their excursion to be more ethical and give back to host communities, rather than just taking from them (Butcher 2005).

The explicit desire and need to give back to another community has become a bi-product of a growing postmodern economy, some experts argue. Growing up in a capitalist economy that inherently promotes overconsumption, many young Americans go through their lives with guilt for the benefits of their suburban lifestyle, argues Young (Young 2001). For example, many children were raised with the familiar phrase ‘children are starving in Africa’, and with this, it is no wonder that people grow up feeling morally wrong for having so much freely given to them. Similarly, NGOs, in general, have capitalized on poverty, and what Nathanson calls poverty pornography has a clear impact on consumers, in that the goal is to get people engaged in acts of service (Nathanson 2013). With the knowledge that today's children are raised with generational guilt for what capitalism has given them, we can also understand how this same motive would come to influence how people experience international community service themselves, and how they do or do not sustain long-term benefits for the host communities or their own.

### ***long-term Community Benefits***

Perhaps obviously, if one is to lend their help to a community that is not their own, there becomes a clear power dynamic between who is the giver and receiver of the ‘gift’ of service. Scholars generally agree that the paternalistic relationship that comes with international service work is inherently patronizing, and the idea of one community *needing* the service of an outsider group of young people is infantilizing (Lyons et. al. 2012). As previously mentioned, the construction of the new moral tourist sets out to be a sort of reformed tourist, one that is more intentional about their purchases or perhaps gives back to their host community in one way or another. Yet, the line between giving back and white saviorism is very thin, and it is often traveler’s beliefs that other communities *need* their help that leaves an imprint of a harmful narrative that both actors may carry long after the traveler’s experience has come to a close.

As briefly noted, the act of volunteering itself or the motivation to help others is rarely the largest reason people participate in volunteer tourism. In the end, research has presented that volunteer tourism, and even experiences that are entirely centered around one large service project, are ultimately motivated by self-serving objectives rather than the intent to contribute to community service. With this in mind, however, it is still valuable to try and understand the correlative relationship between short-term international service and long-term community engagement.

Once volunteers return from their service trip, the reacclimation process is notoriously turbulent and precarious. Smith explains that upon one's return home, the first six weeks of return will be the most influential in determining the achievability of the individual's initial motivations for travel. Here, alumni networks, continual reflection, and post-trip volunteer bonding remain crucial to ensuring that the individual memorializes their experiences, and perhaps even puts them to use, rather than leaving the lessons learned in the past (Alder 1981). However, this is a fine line. As Grabowski, Wearing, and Small found, if post trip support networks function to try and incorporate specific aspects of the host communities life into the westerners way of life, such as familial roles or other cultural frameworks, the individual will have a much more difficult time readjusting to western lifestyles (Grabowski, Wearing, and Small 2016, 4). Therefore, it is key that in post trip reacclimation, group facilitators should be both mature and culturally aware adults, rather than encouraging a more creative reflection process.

Once reacclimated into western life, many individuals across the board report their experience to be life-changing, but this does not inherently mean that they continue to contribute

towards community service projects in their own lives at home (Zahra and McIntosh 2007, 117). In fact, research shows that there is little qualitative or quantitative data on whether or not people regularly participate in community service once they return home. This is likely because volunteer tourism organizations do little record-keeping on the post-trip lives of their customers, as well as the understanding that much of the academic research surrounding volunteer tourism is not only newer but also largely either focused on the trip itself or the impacts taken on by host communities.

### **Participant Dialogue**

For my interview process, 10 young adults and one non-profit professional were interviewed regarding their experiences with international community service. Going forward, it will be crucial to note that the term ‘international community service’ was strictly used throughout the interview process, but in this paper, the terms ‘international community service’ and ‘volunteer tourism’ are used interchangeably. The original goal of interview selection was to find individuals who went on an international service trip when they were between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, and are now at least twenty one years of age or older, in the hopes to try and understand what poverty exposure meant to young people, and if that played a role in their continuation of community service work at home. However, due to the nature of some of the trips and the ways that participants were contacted, some individuals went on trips between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, which likely played a role in their individual maturity, and may have impacted their experience. Before searching for participants, age was a key piece of cultural understanding and personal development, but due to a lack of participants, poverty exposure at a young age as it relates to long-term community involvement will only be a supplemental part of this research.

Within volunteer tourism, there exist two types of organizations in which young people participate. Faith-based organizations, which are typically new wave Christian youth groups that historically have a predominant motive to spread their faith, differ from non-faith-based organizations that have no religious affiliation and are typically far more ambiguous in their motivations. Generally speaking, Christian youth groups typically travel from middle to upper middle-income suburbs throughout America, where non-faith-based trips are typically composed of young adults from larger metropolitan cities. Volunteer tourism has come under heat both in academia and popular media in the last decade, but, from a general perspective, it is obvious that faith based organizations have a much worse reputation than non faith based organizations. To many, it is almost as if one can navigate explaining the ethics of a non-faith-based trip much easier than one could of a faith-based one. For example, many people in academia and beyond have come to realize how simplistic works of volunteering such as building a school or visiting an orphanage can be destructive to the host communities, whereas more robust, organized experience may add much more value to both parties involved (Guttentag 2009). As mentioned, there is little data that represents the long-term impact on individuals and whether or not their service work abroad correlates to service work at home. Furthermore, if there is a difference in outcomes between faith based and non faith based trips. The following interviews and analyses set out to not only identify which types of organizations produce the most favorable outcome, being long-term domestic community involvement, but also, to pinpoint which variables can be associated with the favorable outcome.

### ***Faith Based Organizations***

Before diving into the motivations and outcomes of individuals who went on a faith based trips, it would be worthwhile to first understand the nature of new wave christian churches as well as the frameworks surrounding youth service trips. New wave christianity often refers to lively, youthful church groups that engage entire communities, and some even go so far as building a K-12 education around the church. With this, Bartos points out the ‘neo-charismatic movement’, which can be categorized as a demonstration of faith that works by and through serving others with no self rewarding motive in return (Bartos 2015). This definition holds up well with international service work, as the simple goodness to serve others often stands out as a reason as to why christian churches send teens abroad for service work. As mentioned, the new wave christian churches that build entire communities around themselves, will come to serve as a primary motivation to some travelers.

### ***Christian Motivations***

Four out of the ten people interviewed were both alums of past faith based experiences, and all from suburbs of Denver, Colorado. To better understand motivations and how they may or may not correlate to long standing community service patterns, each participant was asked what their motivations were for going on the trips. Focusing on the participants from Colorado, all four individuals cited their relationship with the church and its community as a primary reason. Seth, now 26, went to Valor Christian High School, giving him a private education in a wealthy suburb of the metropolitan city. His high school curriculum was deeply centered around the school’s religious values, and the school provided what was called the ‘Discovery Program’, wherein a student’s elective credits could be occupied by a school trip to a developing country. On Discovery Programs, students would visit orphanages and homes for the sick, all while trying to observe another culture. When asked what motivated him to go on a discovery trip instead of filling his electives another way, he responded “everyone else is going, I figured I might as well too”. When speaking to the three other individuals from Denver and asking them the same question, they shared a common theme. One woman, who is now 21 and did not go to the same high school as Seth, remarked that going on a christian service trip “just seemed like the thing to do”.

When probed deeper, some participants had more thoughts on why they chose to go on a mission trip with their youth group. As mentioned earlier, becoming a global citizen, and more particularly, one that learns about other people and cultures in a way that may prove beneficial to the individual remains a primary motive for individuals to go abroad. One participant, Zachary, a now 25-year-old in Seattle, reported going on multiple trips to Mexico with his progressive Christian church. To him, building houses in Mexico was going to give him experiences that colleges would value on an application essay. More specifically, he described growing up in a suburb in which he felt like he did not have any unique personal growth stories that would make him stand out on a college application essay. “I wanted to get in there with my hands and build stuff, but also I wanted to learn about other people and cultures”, he remarked. For many participants who went on faith-based trips, they shared a similar story.

Jessica, a participant from Highlands Ranch, a wealthy and well-established suburb of Denver, explained feeling like she needed to get out of the “Highlands Ranch Bubble”. Another participant from the area described the same phenomenon verbatim. This idea that individuals grow up in privileged areas with seemingly ‘not enough poverty’, was addressed earlier and can be referenced as civic desserts. From every single faith-based participant, each expressed the

concept of feeling stuck in a civic desert, alongside one of their largest motivations to go in the first place, being that people around them were going. From their accounts, it becomes obvious how the new wave of Christianity that occupies entire suburbs of America spurs teenagers into going abroad simply because there is ‘not enough poverty’ to go around.

### ***The Christian Experience***

In order to produce a lasting experience in volunteer tourism, one of the most key elements to providing travelers with a memory that has the potential to change their habits back at home is a regulatory reflection process. Scholars across the board recognize the importance of reflection in order to guide travelers as they hold onto transformational experiences (Coghlan and Gooch 2011). Christian organizations carry out their service trips with a heavy emphasis on their religion, and with this, daily devotionals or spiritual time is a common theme throughout faith based mission trips. With every individual who participates in a faith-based trip, they indicated a regulatory reflection process at the end of each trip. However, it became evident that the reflection process is often centered around religious reflection, rather than a more practical observation of their surroundings.

One individual, by the name Kendra, went to a school for the deaf and blind orphans in Tijuana, Mexico. She went with her grandparents and a few other teenagers, and when asked what the reflection process was like, she described journals that she had filled to the brim. When asked what she was recording, Kendra pointed out that the journals were mainly full of scripture and prayers for the children, rather than writing down what she was experiencing to be there. “It was just so moving to be there, it was like a whole other world of people that needed our help”, she stated. The neo-charismatic protestant movement that was discussed earlier sheds light on this experience. Kendra noted that all of the sermons she attended encouraged her that reflecting on this process for herself was seen as an act of selfishness, and the sole intention of the trip was to serve the less fortunate.

In a similar light, one participant by the name of Alex went to Haiti with his youth group on three different trips when he was in his teen years. He described a similar experience to Kendra, in that he underwent daily reflection processes, but they were heavily centered around religion rather than practical implications. When prompted to explain how he made sense of it all, in other words, how and what he learned about why Haiti is so poor and why such extreme poverty exists, his answer was rather emblematic of the youth Christian service experience. “It’s all God’s plan I guess, I don’t know what his plan is for Haiti and the poor people there, but I’m sure it’s something, and we just have to trust it”, he proudly remarked. The goal of that question was to see if there was some explanation of statehood during the experience, in the hopes of realizing one’s sense of civic accountability and political implications, but instead, it becomes obvious that religious inclinations are used as an understanding, of which may correspond to the likelihood of community engagement upon return home.

### ***Non-Faith Based Organizations***

For many young people, going abroad after high school and before college is seen as a way to push oneself out of their comfort zone, and in the process of doing so, gaining personal skills that will be seen as valuable in a professional setting. Identifying oneself as a ‘global citizen’ is often a primary motivation for many individuals going abroad, and doing some service work with a little leisure time in between does not seem like a bad option. However, unlike faith

based organizations, run of the mill volunteer tourism is often far less structured and therefore, less likely to make a lasting impact on the individual.

### ***The Volunteer Tourist Experience***

Volunteer tourism companies are notoriously problematic for their lack of planning, preparation, and program facilitation (Guttentag 2011). Not only are programs poorly coordinated, but more often than not, participants are not grouped together in any significant way, and unlike faith based organizations, it is possible that participants have little to nothing in common. With this, it is easy to presume that non-faith based organizations will have a weaker reflection process when compared to faith based organizations. However, this does not mean that non-faith based organizations provide a better or worse experience for volunteer tourists.

Tessa, a then sixteen year old high school student from the Bay Area of California, was eager to be selected as a participant for her high school's trip to Ecuador. With an organization called 'Global Glimpse', Tessa was sent to Ecuador with other highschoolers from across the country to build a school for the hearing impaired. She recalled hiring contractors, learning about micro-loans, and taught English classes with twelve other students from various places across America. "I was never in it for the service", she claimed, "I wanted to learn about international trade and business". Let me be clear that there is nothing wrong with not wanting to do service work, especially considering the fact that she was sold this program as an opportunity to better her college resume and experience working with economics on an international scale. And similar to other volunteers, Tessa expressed an eagerness to see life beyond her hometown. When reflecting on her past experiences and whether they played a role on her level of community engagement today, she leaned on her current education. A now senior at the University of Puget Sound, Tessa stated that she currently has no time for meaningful community involvement, though when prompted, she pointed to her belief that her pursuit of an education will enable her to become more involved in international communities later on.

Another young woman from the Bay Area, Courtney, decided to do her personal development work in Tanzania and Kenya. In one three week trip, the organization that Gabriella enrolled in prompted her to play with children in an orphanage in Tanzania, and then hop on a flight to Kenya to do more of the same. Gabriella described the trip as being a whirlwind, and with little to no structure, she felt like she was largely on her own in these countries as she stayed in hostels and grocery shopped for herself. When describing the volunteer experience itself, she noted that "work never felt like work, it felt like she [I] was just going to play with kids". Though the whole excursion was described as discombobulated, Gabriella did express some meaningful experiences. "I felt like their big sister, I just wanted to be someone that could console them through the hard times they were facing", she said as she reflected on the experience, though she later added that "the language barrier probably made supporting them a little difficult". Similar to Tessa, Gabriella does not envision herself as being involved in her community today, though she views her pursuit of a college degree as a step in making more long-term change in the future.

Both Tessa and Gabriella shared the sentiment that their time abroad encouraged them to want to pursue an education so that they can more meaningfully contribute later on. However, when asked about specific career plans, they both said things like "business associate", "chief executive of a big company or something", or even "pediatric doctor". However, despite their wide array of goals for the future, all women agreed that they wanted to do something good for the world. They had open hearts and were eager to pursue their education with the goal of using

it for wide and meaningful civic engagement later on. One other participant, Mackenzie from New Hampshire who went on a non-religiously affiliated service trip to Kenya when she was eleven, also corroborated Tessa and Gabriella's response to the influence volunteer trips had on their career goals. All three young women expressed that their volunteer experiences had a meaningful impact on them, and despite not being civically engaged in their own communities today, they had life goals of changing the world in one way or another. In other words, all three women regarded themselves as future career women, and they wanted their careers, shaped by their experiences, to improve the lives of people around the world.

## **Connections**

### ***The Faith Based Experience***

For the participants that went on religiously affiliated faith based international service trips, their motives, processes, and outcomes were all relatively similar, despite the fact that participants were from different states and went on different programs. The participants' motivations for going on their trips was the most transferable from individual to individual. Nearly all participants expressed feeling like they did not grow up around enough poverty, and that they never felt like their hometown service work was giving them the culture shock they were actively pursuing. In other words, these teenagers felt the effects of growing up in the civic desert as described by Atwell, Bridgeland, and Levine. Furthermore, all participants described growing up in upper middle class suburbs that were already centered around christianity and thus the neo-charismatic movement previously described by Bartos.

The physical process of the trips themselves were quite remarkable. Each participant of a Christian mission trip recalled the trip being meticulously planned for the traveler, which included home stays, community entertainment, and a heavy emphasis on a daily reflection process. However, arguably the most important part of the trip described by Coughlan and Gooch, the regulatory reflection process, entirely missed the point of the trip and voided the experience of its potential to make meaningful and lasting change on the participants. The daily reflections were often led by pastors, and encouraged individuals to dive deeper into their religion, often leaning on Christianity to explain away the poverty that was surrounding them. Rather than teaching young people about colonialism, capitalist exploitation, or the importance of civic accountability, leaders of these trips encouraged individuals to lean on God as the answer for some of the existential questions that arise with intense poverty exposure in adolescence.

Due to strong organizational strategies, young teens who were from the same youth groups and went abroad together, formed intensely close bonds with one another. And upon return home, many people did in fact remain engaged in their communities. Once teens that are now full adults who have distant memories of their volunteer trip, still regularly volunteer. Participants described doing monthly canned food drives, passing out blankets to the homeless, and even starting partner organizations within their communities at home in order to take on more service projects. Nearly all participants described still regularly volunteering through and with their church communities, and most participants described their trip as an event in their life in which they got closer with their peers, closer to God, and were inspired to continue service work at home. However, this cycle remains exclusively within their church communities. None of the individuals had much of a regard for systemic change, but rather enjoyed smaller feel good activities as a group.

This is not to argue that there is anything *wrong* with casual community volunteering, but it is clear that individuals did not have a true passion for social justice or participating in systemic change, and the religiously centered reflection processes may be to blame. Participants did not express a personal value in voting, nor did they express much of an interest in educating themselves on domestic or international affairs. Similarly, they did not aspire towards careers in which they would be chipping away at any major social injustice. So while volunteers from faith based service trips often returned home eager to further participation in their own communities, this community engagement was limited to their church group, and individuals lacked an educational and theoretical understanding of individual accountability as it related to systemic shifts in social justice.

### ***The Non-Faith Based Experience***

Teens that embarked on a volunteer tourism trip often shared similar motives as well, of which also aligned with those on Christian mission trips. Simply put, a majority of individuals just wanted to get out of their hometown. However, unlike with faith based trips, these teens expressed a specific entrepreneurial motivation to going abroad. In a world that pushed for a four year college degree, these teens often saw going abroad as a way to sharpen their cultural and professional skills in such a way that would give them a leg up against other college applicants.

Perhaps the largest contrast between faith based and non-faith based trips was the ways in which the trips were organized. On all accounts, non-faith based trips were very disorganized. Travelers were often put with random participants from across the country whom they had nothing in common with, and each participant was essentially dropped somewhere in a random community abroad and was given little direction as to what to do. Gabriella even said one of her roommates went to the hospitals, another worked on a random farm, and she played with orphans, and at night, they were all expected to fend for themselves in the downtown capital of Dodoma, Tanzania. None of the travelers that were interviewed for their experience on a non-faith based trip had any recollection of a reflection process of any sort. Moreover, there were just a few that described participating in cultural awareness seminars before they got on the plane. Participants described their trips as feeling improvised, and it was as if they were expected to do the learning and personal development in isolation with little to no organizational leadership.

Despite their trips bringing an average level of personal development that one would expect come with intense poverty exposure at a young age, none of the participants from non-faith based trips sustained community involvement once back home. When contrasted with those who went on faith based trips, volunteer tourists did not find community, nor did they involve themselves in more service work. However, this is not to say that they did not want to continue service work. Every single volunteer tourist expressed what Kiely calls the ‘chameleon complex (Kiely 2004). Tessa described it perfectly, stating that she “really wanted to continue volunteering, but no one around her [me] felt as compelled” as she did. In other words, when teens observed poverty with a group of teens from around the country, they naturally felt compelled to make long-term change and were charged with passion when the trip was over, but once home, they were no longer surrounded by the people who understood their experiences, and thus lost motivation to continue development work in their own homes. Understandably, individuals who once were optimistic about their ability to make change suddenly lost their motivation due to a lack of organization and group facilitation.

With more systemic awareness and personal questioning compared to those on faith based trips, volunteer tourists tended to stray away from regular community volunteering, but instead reasoned that their pursuit of education would enable them to make more meaningful change later on in their lives. Despite little to no preparation or legitimate organization, faith based trips showed a tendency to produce a sense of valuable service work, rather than one off volunteering. In other words, participants from non-faith based trips did not continue minimal volunteer projects, but instead, they in fact did come away with a sense of strong civic accountability and an awareness of systems of oppression, which in turn, motivated them to pursue a career in which they *could* use their education to better the lives of others in one altruistic way or another.

## **Conclusion**

From the perspective of the traveler, there is undeniable personal growth that is to be had from volunteer tourist experiences, whether they are rooted in faith or not. It is also clear that both faith based and non-faith based organizations have their strengths and weaknesses. Due to the often inherently problematic trends of volunteer tourism, there is no perfect answer on how to conduct volunteer tourism. However, for the purpose of this research, and for the favorable outcome of long-term community engagement by the individual, it has become evident that there are certain characteristics from faith based and non-faith based international service organizations that can produce the aforementioned favorable outcome.

In the simplest terms, faith based trips lead to more domestic community engagement activities than non-faith based trips did. Faith-based trips were described as highly organized with a strong reflection process integrated into the program, and participants nearly always experienced a real sense of community among themselves and the other volunteers. Participants from faith based trips continued regular or semi-regular community volunteering with their church groups from home. In practice, volunteers described regularly helping at a homeless shelter or doing activities such as canned food drives. While this was the short-term goal of the research, it was also important that volunteers come back with a vision of themselves as actors of change in a much larger system of activism, social justice, and community development. Despite regular and rather simplistic volunteering efforts, the participants from faith based trips seemed to lack a grasp of politically and culturally oppressive systems. Given that the reflection processes were deeply rooted in religion, it makes sense that participants lacked the type of global learning that is possible from traveling. In the same vein, participants from faith based groups did not view their travel experiences as something that shaped their future career, nor did they picture themselves in a career field that would relate to any form of global development work.

Non-faith based trips were often disorganized and participants explained feeling a lack of purpose. Volunteers were put with people from all across the country, with whom they had nothing but age in common with, so it is no wonder that they experienced a lack of community. Participants from non-faith based trips also went in with little to no cultural awareness education, trip planning, or integrated reflection processes. Unsurprisingly, participants did not return home and engage in any sort of community activism. However, despite a lack of preparation, organization, or sustained community engagement, every non-faith based participant saw their current educational or career related pursuits as stepping stones in their path to be an active participant in development. Despite being organized so vastly different from faith based trips,

non-faith based volunteers returned from their trip with a hunger for real, long-term, sustained change. They viewed themselves as visionaries for the future, vehicles for development, and virtuous changemakers. Perhaps miraculously, they were aware of international regimes, colonialist practices, and oppressive political power structures that created the place they visited, and it was evident that participants seemed to have a grasp of the real world around them. Though they were not regularly collecting box tops or knitting blankets for kittens, they viewed their education and other current pursuits as necessary steps to achieving more long-term, sustained international development and change.

From the research gathered and participant interviews, it becomes clear that faith based trips produced more short-term domestic volunteering, which in some instances is favorable. However, participants lacked a wider understanding of development work and they did not view themselves as actors of change. While this might be good enough, it surely is not the type of long-term change, personal growth, and knowledge acquisition that might lead to more sustained development work. And while they did not volunteer regularly at home, non-faith participants did in fact picture themselves as actors of development work, and they longed for a future relating to the field in one way or another.

It seems as though that the experiences and lessons learned from faith based trips were only hindered by their religious reliance. If not religiously affiliated, it is possible that participants would have had the same meaningful understanding and motive for future change that non-faith based participants had. However, on the other hand, it is highly possible that the religious reliance itself was what brought forth the stronger group dynamics, and what maintained the real and continued volunteer work at home. This research is not to say that one type of trip is morally better than the other, but rather, that both types of trips produced experiences that either continued small-scale volunteering or motivated individuals to pursue more wide, global development work.

There is certainly more research to be done on the scope of international volunteer work. While volunteer tourism may present a chance to find a career path or become engaged in development work, this does not go to say that low income communities abroad should be utilized for suburban American teensagers as a personal development playground. While this research presented favorable outcomes for both faith based and non faith based trips, it is likely that these outcomes could have been achieved from a cultural exchange program rather than a volunteer service trip. Given that there is thorough, well researched evidence suggesting that volunteer service trips produce the harmful white savior complex and can perpetuate attitudes of global superiority, the opportunity for teens to engage in meaningful community service work should be explored in other areas. Given that both types of service organizations produced some sort of net positive outcome for the individual, it can be concluded that in all trips, and within all participants surveyed, there is something to be learned about international service work, and more importantly, there is room to grow and find passion in community engagement.

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