

Local to Global Service-Learning

A Two-Hour Volunteer Experience in Global Citizenship

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Introduction

Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) is a higher education institution located at the border of southern Texas and Mexico and was, in 2016, for the second consecutive year, recognized with the Presidential Honor Roll Award for its admirable service-learning projects. The Presidential Honor Roll Award is the highest federal recognition given to higher education institutions that “[commit] to community, service-learning and civic engagement” (Palacios, 2016, p. 24).

The 2017 TAMIU Annual Report highlighted more than 49,222+ student volunteer hours with \$4 million of monetary impact since 2010 (Harmon, 2018).

The University’s nationwide recognition for its exemplary community service programs may be attributed to the university’s mission statement, which sets the following standard:

[TAMIU] prepares students for leadership roles in an increasingly complex, culturally diverse state, national, and global society. . . . The University pursues a progressive agenda for global study and

understanding across all disciplines. . . . Through instruction, faculty and student research, and public service, TAMIU improves the quality of lives for citizens of the border region, the State of Texas, and national and international communities.¹

Driven by the motto of civic engagement and local to global citizenship, TAMIU is a campus that emphasizes building a friendly community in which students and faculty engage in building strong personal and professional relationships that will lead them toward a more globally aware, socially just, and democratic society

According to Loeb (cited in Barnhardt, Sheets, & Pasquesi, 2015), “college is a formative time where students develop the habits of mind and assumptions necessary for community life and democratic participation; as such college has far-reaching consequences for civic engagement” (p. 623). Hence the climate that the campus creates is a crucial factor during each student’s personal and professional development because it will heavily influence the student’s disposition as a citizen of his or her local, national, and global community.

But how does a university with more than 7,000 students engage each student globally when it is not financially possible to fund international service-learning for all students? Faculty and students at this university are joining those who have found ways to serve locally with an international lens to impact globally.

Engaging Locally to Impact Globally

Feed My Starving Children (FMSC) provides nutritious meals to children who are malnourished. Tackling world hunger since 1987 by sending volunteer-packed, nutritious meals to 70 countries, the organization has evolved as the premiere

disaster-relief food provider out of the United States. A Christian nonprofit organization, FMSC prepares meals specifically designed to assist in preventing and reversing malnutrition. Meals are delivered to children through schools, orphanages, clinics, and feeding programs.

In 2016, FMSC welcomed more than 1.1 million volunteers to pack nearly 284 million meals through its permanent sites and nationwide MobilePack program. In FMSC’s 30-year history, more than 99% of the meals distributed arrived successfully at their intended destinations in some of the most unpredictable regions of the world.²

An exemplar of a nonprofit powered by volunteers and investing funding in its mission, the Minnesota-based charity invests more than 90% of total donations directly into feeding the hungry and has earned the highest 4-star rating from Charity Navigator for 12 consecutive years.³

Service-Learning as Global Citizens

An important teaching-learning aspect of the MobilePack events is the deliberate structure of pre- and postpacking instruction and reporting. All participants receive video and demonstration training before donning their hair nets and staffing their stations to measure, weigh, count, and pack the MannaPack bags of vitamins, veggies, soy, and rice. FMSC’s specially trained leaders supervise and encourage the teams who quickly coalesce into packing machines to reach the goals and feed as many children as possible.

Typically, MobilePack events are hosted in school gyms and churches. TAMIU was the first campus in the Texas A&M University System to host a MobilePack event on university grounds, in fact, in the Student Center Rotunda (see Figure 1). The event was promoted as an opportunity

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to serve locally and impact globally. This study was focused on determining how successful the event was by surveying volunteers after they had engaged in training and packing meals. Even if participants packed meals at more than one shift, each participant was surveyed only once.

On February 24–25, 2017, TAMIU hosted a MobilePack event at the Student Center Rotunda.⁴ Approximately 600 TAMIU students and community members, aged 5–75 years, eagerly volunteered to staff two-hour shifts to pack medically fortified, nutritious meals for children who suffer from malnourishment.

Service-Learning as Pedagogy

In tandem with scholars engaged in the study of service-learning, the authors have intentionally chosen to use the hyphenated spelling to indicate the requisite engagement in both *service* and *learning* (Clayton, 2016; Furco & Billig, 2001; Jacoby, 1996), thus distinguishing service-learning

from a myriad of other community service or internship learning models.

Pedagogically, then, the definition of the service-learning experience upon which this study was conceptualized is that popularized by Robert G. Bringle and Patti H. Clayton (Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2013) in their collective work:

a course or competency-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in mutually identified service activities that benefit the community, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (Bringle & Clayton, 2012, pp.114-115, adapted from Bringle & Hatcher, 1996)

Clayton's (2016) three-part framework for service-learning, adopted by TAMIU, features academic study, practical experience, and civic engagement as the three pillars for service-learning (p. 3).

But the phrase *service-learning* has been employed to encompass a wide variety of interpretations. The definition of *service-learning* and its implementation at the event deserve consideration, as this study seeks to identify the impact of such engagement. The definition of *service-learning* provided by the Corporation for National and Community Service as outlined under the National Service Act of 1990 is an event:

under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation and thoughtfully organized service that;

1. is conducted in and meets the need of a community;
2. is coordinated with elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or a community service program, and with community;
3. helps foster civic responsibility;
4. is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled;
5. provides structured time for students or participants to reflect on the service experience. (Weiley, 2011, p. 264)

Similar themes were detailed in two other commonly referenced definitions of *service-learning*. In *Service-Learning in Higher Education*, Jacoby (1996) defined *service-learning* as “experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Jacoby stressed *reflection* and *reciprocity* as key concepts of service-learning (p. 14).

The concept of reflection was also highlighted in a report from the National Commission on Service-Learning by Fiske (2002), meaningfully titled *Learning in Deed: The Power of Service-Learning for American Schools*. The report listed these elements of quality service-learning:

1. Projects have clear educational goals that require the application of concepts, content, and skills from the academic disciplines and involve students in constructing their own knowledge.
2. Projects engage students in challenging cognitive and developmental tasks.
3. Teachers use assessment to enhance the student learning and to document and evaluate how well they have met standards.

Figure 1

A bird's-eye view from the Rotunda second-level cheering section during the TAMIU FMSC MobilePack.



4. Service tasks have clear goals, meet genuine community needs, and have significant consequences.
5. Teachers use formative and summative evaluation in a systematic evaluation.
6. Students have a voice in selecting, designing, implementing, and evaluating their service project.
7. Diversity is valued and demonstrated by participants, practice, and outcomes.
8. Service projects foster communication, interaction, and partnerships with the community.
9. Students are prepared for all aspects of their work.
10. Students *reflect before, during, and after service*. Reflection encourages critical thinking and is a central force in the design and fulfillment of curricular objectives.
11. Multiple methods acknowledge, celebrate, and validate students' service work. (p. 18, emphasis added)

Methodology

The lead author created a survey composed of 10 items, seven forced-choice questions, and three open-ended questions, to gather participants' responses about their MobilePack experience after volunteering in one or more two-hour shifts hand-packing meals. Using Berk's (2007) major periods of human development, the first items in the survey were purposefully structured to collect volunteers' basic demographic information, such as gender and age range. Similarly, some of the survey items were borrowed from FMSC's postpacking survey.⁵

The survey was created through SurveyMonkey[®] and was accessed during the two days of the event by participants through four laptops granted by TAMU's Office of Information Technology. The survey station was located adjacent to the auditorium used for prepack training and for postpack reporting.

More than 100 hard copies of the survey were printed for participants who preferred paper-and-pencil responses. Additionally, a QR code was created, allowing participants to respond to the survey from the comfort of their own devices, such as tablets and mobiles.

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption was granted for this research study to collect data from participants who were 18 years and older. Thus, the number of participants taking the survey did not include children and younger people un-

der 18 years of age. This delimitation was determined by the authors since many students would be participating with local public schools and youth groups and obtaining parental/guardian consent would be problematic, if even possible.

Findings

By the end of the two-day event, "[volunteers] pack[ed] 540 boxes of nutritious, medically endorsed meals [which is] . . . a total of 116,640 meals, enough to feed 316 children every day for an entire year."⁶ From the approximately 600 registered two-hour shift volunteers, 170 volunteers participated in the survey. Because some volunteers stayed or returned for a second shift, the actual number of individual volunteers was difficult to determine.

Equally true, many of the volunteers served as support beyond the actual packing of food, such as working at the registration or certification tables, coordinating the door prizes for each shift, staffing the Global MarketPlace where participants could purchase FMSC logo gear or handcrafted, fair-trade items. These funds helped pay for the event and the area was continuously staffed by multiple volunteers during the two-day event.

Based on the demographic data collected from the participants, the following profile evolved: Of the 170 participants surveyed, 28% ($n = 48$) were male volunteers

and 72% ($n = 122$) were female volunteers. Surveyed participants reported 92% were ages 18–40 years ($n = 156$), 7% were ages 41–65 years ($n = 12$), and 1% were older than 65 ($n = 2$). While 75% ($n = 127$) were registered students and/or currently employed at TAMU, the remaining 25% ($n = 43$) were not.

Moreover, 15% ($n = 26$) of participants surveyed registered with MobilePack through a school, 5% ($n = 9$) through a church, 18% ($n = 33$) as an independent university student, 15% ($n = 26$) through a university course, 21% ($n = 38$) through a university organization, 6% ($n = 11$) as university faculty and/or staff, 13% ($n = 23$) individually, and 7% ($n = 13$) of the surveyed participants did not fit any of the above categories related to how they registered to participate (see Table 1).

There were multiple instances throughout the event when volunteers were informed about food insecurity and FMSC's social justice cause to eradicate hunger. For instance, before and after the two-hour shifts, volunteers saw video clips that talked about families and children who suffer hunger every day. Narratives from these people were shown to the volunteers in short clips, and images of children before and after they entered an FMSC feeding program were displayed to show how FMSC has impacted those children's lives for the better.

Because of the event's social justice

Table 1
Demographic Information From Surveyed Participants

Survey questions	Responses	Percentage
1. What is your gender?		
Male	48	28.24
Female	122	71.76
2. What is your age range? (in years)		
18–40	156	91.76
41–65	12	7.06
65+	2	1.18
3. Are you currently enrolled or employed at TAMU?		
Yes	127	74.71
No	43	25.29
4. How did you register to MobilePack? ^a		
School	26	14.53
Church	9	5.02
University student	33	18.44
University course	26	14.53
University organization	38	21.23
University faculty/staff	11	6.14
Individual	23	12.85
Other	13	7.26

Note. $N =$ There were 170 participants in the survey.

^a Nine participants responded to question 4 with more than one category.

Table 2
Forced-Choice Question

Survey question	Responses	Percentage
5. What made the biggest impression on you when you learned about hunger?		
Before-and-after photos of children	68	27.98
Every day, at least 6,200 children die from starvation	70	28.81
Uniqueness of the MannaPack food formula	28	11.52
Stories about children coping with hunger	66	27.16
Other	11	4.53

Notes.

N = 169 participants responded to this question; one participant's response was excluded since it did not answer the question.

A total of 34 participants responded with more than one answer.

framework, one survey item was taken from FMSC's post-packing survey to capture volunteers' awareness of child hunger around the world. The question was the following: "What made the biggest impression on you when you learned about hunger?" Of the 170 participants surveyed, all but one answered this question. Among surveyed participants, 29% (*n* = 70) agreed that learning about how "every day, at least 6,200 children die from starvation" made the biggest impression on them, 28% (*n* = 68) shared that the before and after photos of children had the biggest impression on them, 12% (*n* = 28) agreed that the uniqueness of the MannaPack food formula made the biggest impression on them, while 27% (*n* = 66) agreed that the stories about children coping with hunger had the biggest impression on them. The remaining 5% (*n* = 11) described other factors that had the biggest impression on them (see Table 2).

The remaining questions from the survey were open-ended questions that participants could answer based on their personal experiences and observations. From the responses, the lead author was able to identify several themes.

Among the 170 participants surveyed, only 158 answered the following question: "Why did you come to the MobilePack?" Among surveyed participants, 42% (*n* = 69) came to the MobilePack to volunteer/serve/help make a difference, and 20% (*n* = 32) came to help feed children, 20% (*n* = 33) came to fulfill a commitment (a) for community hours, (b) as part of a course, and/or (c) because of an organization requirement. Additionally, 10% (*n* = 17) of the participants stated they came to the MobilePack because they heard about the event or were invited to volunteer, to support a friend or a family member. Similarly, 3% (*n* = 5) were parents and/or teachers

who proudly stated they came to model service-learning for their children and/or students. Four (2.5%) of the participants surveyed had previously participated at another MobilePack and decided to participate again, and the remaining 2.5% (*n* = 4) stated they came for another reason (see Table 3).

The next question asked participants to list three words that describe their experience at the MobilePack. A total of 99 words were registered by 162 participants; however, only the words that were used more than 5 times were documented. The word that was listed the most was *fun* (17%; *n* = 76), then the similar words *inspirational* / *inspired* / *inspiring* (5%; *n* = 22), followed by the words *help* / *helpful* / *helping* (5%; *n* = 21), and, last, the words *amazing* and *awesome* (5%; *n* = 20 and 5%; *n* = 21, respectively). The remaining words were listed between 1 and 12 times by participants (see Table 3).

The last open-ended question asked for a brief description of participants' action step(s) they might take because of this event. Only 136 (80%) out of the 170 participants surveyed answered with a complete action statement. Of the 136 participants who provided a specific response, 24% (*n* = 36) stated they will donate money to FMSC or another organization that promotes social justice. Many of the respondents, 44% (*n* = 66), specified that their next action step would be to volunteer at another MobilePack event or any event that promotes social justice. Some 10% (*n* = 15) of the participants reported that they will work to help children and people in need, while 9% (*n* = 13) stated that they will strive to improve personally by being humble, less wasteful, and appreciate having a meal every day. The other 14% (*n* = 21) of the participants stated they would take action

by organizing events, gathering more information, and informing others about FMSC in order to continue to make a difference.

Finally, one of the forced-choice questions asked participants if they will participate in another MobilePack event, to which 99% (*n* = 168) responded yes and 1% (*n* = 2) responded no. The survey also provided the participants with the choice of receiving the results from the survey, to which 42% (*n* = 72) said yes and 58% (*n* = 98) said no.

Discussion

Collecting Data From Children

FMSC MobilePack was a public event that took place in TAMIU's Student Center. Much of the university and local community, as well as many from outside of the state and community, committed to volunteer during the two days of the event to hand-pack medically fortified, nutritious meals for malnourished children in Haiti. By the end of the event, 170 individuals from the approximately 600 registered two-hour shift volunteers participated in the survey. Because some volunteers stayed or returned for a second shift, the actual number of individual participants was difficult to determine.

Moreover, many local public schools and youth organizations, such as children from a Saturday tutoring program at a local homeless shelter, eagerly volunteered at the MobilePack. IRB exemption approval was granted but only for participants above the age of 18.

Pictures Worth a Thousand Words

The lead author observed the entire two-day event rather than participating in the packing herself and despite the fact that data couldn't be collected from those under age 18 engaged at the event, she was surprised to see the level of engagement children exhibited while hand-packing meals for other children who suffer from starvation. She noticed that just like the older volunteers, children were capable of understanding real-world problems and the impact their presence had at the local and global level. Children and youth comprehended and engaged in complex tasks such as measuring and weighing, with little to no supervision. Pictures of the event testify to the focused engagement of all participants (see Figures 2 & 3).

Despite of what many adults think, children are more than capable of comprehending and participating in complex

tasks. It is just a matter of teaching them and letting them try on their own with proper supervision.

Pedagogical Practice

The TAMIU community has a strong commitment to civic engagement, which influences the expansive engagement of its members (Barnhardt, Sheets, & Pasquesi, 2015); however, varied levels of engagement were soon obvious on the part of the volunteers participating in the survey. Some of the participants would rush through the survey, leaving the open-ended questions blank or incomplete, while others would take their time answering each item. The lead author also noticed that many of the volunteers were leaving the building right after the final presentation that concluded each packing session.

Changes in data collection had to be made to capture as many participants as possible. Instead of waiting for the participants to come to the survey station, as was intended initially and used at the end of the first session, the survey was taken to the volunteers inside the auditorium while they were gathered for the final presentation and reflective debriefing.

Even this change in methodology did not capture the participants who left without attending the final reporting of how many meals had been packed during their own session. Furthermore, participants who left without the summative explanation missed the pre-/post-structure of each of the two-hour sessions intended to bring participants full circle from awareness to local action to global impact. The guided reflection components of these experiences were provided, but without all participants engaging.

While the three-part framework for service-learning (Clayton, 2016) adopted by TAMIU was implicit in the event under study, the study revealed that overt practical experience and civic engagement were more readily evident to the participants than were the academic components.

Implications

The FMSC MobilePack, involving more than 500 participants, was an ideal event to study volunteers' global awareness and responsibility to act while they served locally to impact globally.

An unanticipated discovery was the confusion of university students regarding their registration for the MobilePack

Table 3
Open-Ended Questions

<i>Survey questions</i>	<i>Responses¹</i> <i>n = 164²</i>	<i>Percentage</i> <i>100</i>
6. Why did you come to MobilePack?		
Children	32	19.51
Volunteer	37	22.56
Help Others	32	19.51
Influence Others	5	3.05
Past Experience	4	2.44
Support Others	17	10.37
Fill a Commitment	33	20.12
Other ³	4	2.44
	<i>n = 447⁴</i>	<i>100</i>
	<i>(162 responses⁵)</i>	
8. List three words that describe your experience at MobilePack. ^b		
Amazing	20	4.47
Awesome	21	4.70
Educational	5	1.12
Energetic	8	1.79
Enlightening	5	1.12
Exciting	11	2.46
Eye-opening	6	1.34
Faith ⁶	23	5.15
Fulfilling	6	1.34
Fun	76	17.00
Great	12	2.68
Happy	6	1.34
Heart-warming	7	1.57
Help ⁷	21	4.70
Impacting	7	1.57
Inspirational	22	4.92
Interesting	6	1.34
Joyful	7	1.57
Life-changing	8	1.79
Loving	7	1.57
Motivation	11	2.46
Rewarding	11	2.46
Satisfying	7	1.57
Teamwork	8	1.79
Wonderful	8	1.79
Other ⁸	118	26.40
	<i>n = 151⁹</i>	<i>100</i>
	<i>(138 responses¹⁰)</i>	
9. Describe any action step(s) you might take because of this event.		
Help	15	9.93
Donate	36	23.84
Volunteer	34	22.52
Attend More Events	32	21.19
Improve Personally	13	8.61
Take Action	21	13.91

Notes

¹ 158 participant responses; 12 were not counted as they were either blank or answered in Spanish.

² 6 participants responded with more than one reason.

³ Response did not fit in a category or response was unuseable because it was blank or in Spanish.

⁴ Participants were allowed to fill in 3 words, but not all provided 3 descriptions.

⁵ 8 participant responses were not counted as they were either blank or in Spanish.

⁶ Words relating to faith were grouped together.

⁷ Words relating to help were grouped together.

⁸ Only words with more than 5 responses were listed and the other 74 responses were grouped as other.

⁹ 8 participants responded with more than one action step.

¹⁰ 34 participant responses were not counted as they were left blank or responded with "none."

event. While registration was strongly encouraged and each of the packing sessions was fully registered when the two-day event started, students seemed confused regarding whether their participation was a part of course requirements.

At a university where multiple opportunities are listed for service engagement each week, the confusion was explainable but made interpreting university students' engagement challenging. Greater clarity is needed as part of the registration process. Representation might also be highlighted during each orientation session.

Similarly, when the university IRB determined that students under 18 years of age would not be included in the surveys, the participants who were early-to-college high school students as well as all the elementary students and student organizations who participated were excluded from the survey process. This challenge was apparent to the coauthors since they had conducted workshops for youth organizations in the community. Had the perceptions of the younger students been included, the findings would certainly have

been more descriptive of the participants in the entire event.

The lack of commitment from volunteers can possibly be explained by the 29 (18%) participants surveyed who admitted they came for community hours or as a requirement. Service-learning as a requirement and/or without framing of the service could be a sterile experience for individuals and could have an undesired effect on the individuals' personal and professional dispositions (Littenberg-Tobias, 2014). Despite the previous evidence, six of the 29 participants commented in the survey that after volunteering at the MobilePack, they would have come despite the course or student organization requirement.

The approach to teaching for global awareness and social justice action may necessitate data on opportunities for reflection. Whether participants at the event stayed for the post-event reflection and summary reflected on the service-learning concepts of sustained and engaged reflection by participants.

The findings of this study highlight the need for educators to make the com-

ponents of service-learning transparent to participants whom they engage in service-learning experiences. Core content needs to be defined, in this case, the reasons for child hunger, and the historical, geographical, natural, and man-made factors need to be appropriately explored with students.

While FMSC structures its packing sessions to include these powerful dynamics, the teachers and community volunteers need to work with students to meaningfully engage them and explore the topics. Pre- and post-reflective sessions should be honored by registrants and those who recruit them to participate. A major finding is that students may believe the service makes an event service-learning, but this research supports the notion that it is the *learning* in service-learning that is requisite.

A demographic that bears reporting is that four of the original six-member team continued in leadership by developing the next event. New members are shaping an expanded team who began hosting service-learning projects a full year ahead of the second scheduled packing event. The events afforded service opportunities to TAMIU students and the community in general who wanted to make an impact on global child hunger.

As this manuscript was being written, the TAMIU community has set another MobilePack event for the upcoming academic year, with the results from this study and reflective discussions to guide the planning for the university and the community in which it is invested.

Figure 2

Intense teamwork insured that each FMSC MannaPack bag of six meals contained the needed nourishment to sustain the recipients across the globe.



Notes

¹ Accessed October 2017 from <http://www.tamtu.edu/general.shtml>

² Accessed March 2018 from <https://www.guidestar.org/profile/41-1601449>

³ Accessed May 2018 from https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=search.summary&orgid=9307#.VwGVjXck9_s

⁴ Accessed November 2017 from <http://www.tamtu.edu/newsinfo/2017/03/Mobile-Pack%Update%2003012016.shtml>

⁵ Accessed February 6, 2017, from <https://www.fmsc.org/get-involved/volunteer-info/post-packing-survey>

⁶ Accessed November 26, 2017, from <http://www.tamtu.edu/newsinfo/2017/03/Mobile-Pack%20Update%2003012016.shtml>

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Figure 3

Teams ignored even the up-close camera shots as they maintained focus on the many steps in preparing 36 MannaPack bags of six meals each to fill each box with 216 meals and then shrink-wrap each of 14 crates that ensured safe shipping of 116,480 meals for undernourished children.

