

# **MSC Freshmen Leadership International Costa Rica Service Learning Trip March 2020**

## **Purpose of Assessment**

The Memorial Student Center (MSC) Freshmen Leadership International (FLI) coordinates one major international travel experience for its members each year over spring break. MSC FLI went to Costa Rica again this year from March 7-13, 2020 for this international travel experience. MSC FLI indicated the following outcomes for participants:

- Participants demonstrate a willingness to step out of their comfort zone to try something new.
- Participants use reflection as a tool to examine their leadership skills and privilege in a global context.
- Participants experience teamwork within a diverse group of peers.
- Participants will explore, question, and empathize with other cultures.

Trip participants were assessed at different points during the experience to gauge how well the outcomes were met and the overall impact of this experience. Student Life Studies has worked with MSC FLI to assess this Costa Rica trip since 2013.

## **Key Findings and Recommendations**

Student Life Studies identified several key findings and developed actionable recommendations the committee may take based on the results. However, MSC FLI staff advisors and student leaders may identify other findings using their knowledge and understanding of the community. MSC FLI advisor and student leaders are strongly encouraged to read all the results and qualitative comments to gain a fuller understanding of students' experiences.

- All students reported that they were able to recognize differences between the culture in Costa Rica and the United States (88% strongly agreed and 12% agreed). Additionally, students articulated these differences that they observed on the trip. However, this decreased from last year when 95% strong agreed and 4% agreed.
- Students generally reported being prepared for the trip on both the pre-trip and trip assessments. However, on the pre-trip survey some students indicated they were not at all prepared for different aspects, especially exploring the Costa Rican rainforest and travel logistics. MSC FLI staff may want to look at the orientation meetings and if information could be provided earlier to participants; as well as add more Spanish lessons before the trip.
- Students reported feeling the most prepared to use reflection to make meaning of this experience on the pre-trip assessment (68% were very prepared and 28% were somewhat prepared). However, students were less positive about the reflection activities being valued or beneficial on the trip assessment. Furthermore, improving the reflections was one of the most common suggestions students had about the trip. MSC FLI might want to explore the reflection prompts being asked as well as the structure when the reflection activities happen on the trip. It might be beneficial to ask participants for suggestions on reflection prompts now that they have recently attended this program.
- MSC FLI may want to look at the learning outcomes for this international experience. Students did not talk much about being outside of the comfort zone, using a reflection to look at their leadership skills, or teamwork. Are these still the desired outcomes for the trip? If so, what do students do during the trip that would reach these outcomes? Maybe those are reflection prompts or discussions while on the trip or at the follow-up meeting; however, questions could be included in the assessments to determine if students are reaching these outcomes.

## **Method and Sample**

Two assessments were produced using Teleform<sup>®</sup>, a software program that creates scannable paper surveys and databases. The six-question pre-trip assessment contained four quantitative questions, one qualitative question, and one demographic question. The pre-trip assessment was distributed to participants before departing on the trip at a meeting in January 2020. The trip assessment had 14 questions: 11 quantitative, two qualitative, and one demographic. The trip assessment was distributed to participants while coming home from the trip on March 13, 2020. Both surveys were administered with all 25 trip participants and all completed the survey, yielding a 100% response rate for each survey.

The post-trip assessment was created using Qualtrics<sup>®</sup>, a software program for creating web-based surveys. It was comprised of four qualitative questions and one demographic question. The post-trip assessment was an open-link survey administered during a follow-up Zoom meeting in late March 2020. An exact response rate cannot be calculated due to the survey being conducted as an open link. However, there were 22 completed surveys, which represents 88% of the trip participants.

Data from the three assessments were analyzed using SPSS<sup>®</sup>, a statistical software package and Microsoft Excel<sup>®</sup>.

## **Results**

Results include frequency percentages, means, and standard deviations (sd) for the number of people (n) who responded to the question. For ease of reading, frequency percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole percent, so totals may not add up to exactly 100%. Tables are listed in descending 2020 mean order, with comparisons to previous years made where appropriate. In addition, summary themes for the qualitative questions are contained in this report; the full list of responses can be found in a separate document. Results are provided within three sections: Trip Preparations, Trip Experiences, and Service Experiences.

All three surveys asked students to identify if they were a freshmen participant or a student leader staff member. The student demographics from the pre-trip showed 75% of the participants were freshmen and 25% were student leader staff (n=24). Of the 25 students responding on the trip assessment, 76% were freshmen and 24% were student leader staff. Results from the post-trip assessment were slightly different with 82% of the participants being freshmen and 18% were student leader staff (n=22).

### **Trip Preparations**

Participants were asked, on both the pre-trip assessment and trip assessment, to indicate how prepared they were for a variety of activities and tasks based on the provided orientation sessions. Table 1, on the following page in descending order for the 2020 trip assessment mean, displays both the pre-trip and trip responses. Before leaving on the trip, students reported feeling most prepared to use reflection to make meaning of this experience. After the trip, students felt most prepared to use reflection to make meaning of the experience and to explore the Costa Rican rainforest. In all areas, the pre-trip orientations were scored higher during the trip than before the trip. Additionally, there was a slight decrease for most statements on both the pre-trip and trip assessment when compared to the previous year.

Pre-Trip Orientations Prepared Me...	Very Prepared (3)	Somewhat Prepared (2)	Not At All Prepared (1)	2020 Mean (sd) [n]	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n]	2017 Mean (sd) [n]
PRE - To use reflection to make meaning of this experience	68%	28%	4%	2.64 (.57) [25]	‡	‡	‡
TRIP - To use reflection to make meaning of this experience	79%	21%	--	2.79 (.42) [24]	2.76 (.44) [25]	2.91 (.29) [23]	2.63 (.50) [19]
PRE - To explore Costa Rican rainforest	36%	48%	16%	2.20 (.71) [25]	2.36 (.64) [25]	2.74 (.45) [23]	2.79 (.42) [19]
TRIP - To explore Costa Rican rainforest	79%	21%	--	2.79 (.42) [24]	2.84 (.37) [25]	2.78 (.42) [23]	2.89 (.32) [19]
PRE - For engaging in the Costa Rican culture	52%	44%	4%	2.48 (.59) [25]	2.56 (.51) [25]	2.74 (.45) [23]	2.74 (.45) [19]
TRIP - For engaging in the Costa Rican culture	71%	29%	--	2.71 (.46) [24]	2.88 (.33) [25]	2.83 (.39) [23]	2.84 (.38) [19]
PRE - For traveling logistics of the trip (flight, packing, accommodations, excursions, etc.)	40%	48%	12%	2.28 (.68) [25]	2.68 (.48) [25]	2.74 (.45) [23]	2.79 (.42) [19]
TRIP - For traveling logistics of the trip (flight, packing, accommodations, excursions, etc.)	63%	38%	--	2.63 (.50) [24]	2.96 (.20) [25]	2.83 (.39) [23]	2.63 (.50) [19]

Table 1: Pre-Trip Orientations  
(‡ Question not asked)

### Trip Experiences

On the trip assessment, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with several statements about the actual trip. Table 2, on the following page, demonstrates that participants were mostly in agreement with all statements, especially being able to recognize the differences between the Costa Rican culture and their own and there being sufficient communication between trip student leaders and participants. These results are mostly similar to the previous years.

During the trip, I felt...	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2020 Mean (sd) [n]	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n=23]	2017 Mean (sd) [n=19]
Able to recognize the differences of the Costa Rica culture and my own	88%	12%	--	--	3.88 (.33) [25]	3.96 (.20) [25]	4.00 (.00)	4.00 (.00)
The communication between trip student leaders and trip participants was sufficient	88%	12%	--	--	3.88 (.33) [25]	3.88 (.33) [25]	3.83 (.39)	3.79 (.54)
My input during reflection activities was valued	60%	36%	4%	--	3.56 (.58) [25]	3.56 (.51) [25]	3.61 (.58)	3.68 (.58)
The reflection periods at the end of each day were beneficial	44%	52%	4%	--	3.40 (.58) [25]	3.64 (.57) [25]	3.78 (.42)	3.74 (.45)

Table 2: Trip Experiences

Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements addressing what they learned during the trip. Table 3 shows that all participants were in agreement with all statements about their experience after the trip.

After the trip, I felt...	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2020 Mean (sd) [n]	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n=23]	2017 Mean (sd) [n=19]
More knowledgeable of Costa Rica and the Costa Rican culture due to the excursions (†)	91%	9%	--	--	3.91 (.29) [23]	3.80 (.41) [25]	4.00 (.00)	3.89 (.32)
More knowledgeable of the Costa Rican culture due to my interactions with the local citizens	87%	13%	--	--	3.87 (.34) [23]	3.92 (.28) [25]	4.00 (.00)	3.84 (.38)
More comfortable in an international setting	87%	13%	--	--	3.87 (.34) [23]	3.92 (.28) [25]	3.96 (.21)	4.00 (.00)

Table 3: Learning Outcomes

(† Previous years the question was More knowledgeable of the Costa Rican culture due to the excursions)

The trip assessment asked participants to recommend improvements for future service learning trips and 23 wrote a wide-range of suggestions. The two most common recommendations were to practice more Spanish or make Spanish lessons mandatory before going on the trip and to improve the reflections. While several commented about the reflections, there were various thoughts about them including having less sap stories, creating more thoughtful prompts, encouraging everyone to share, and being in smaller groups. Some additional suggestions included providing the itinerary and travel logistics earlier, having a more detailed packing list, and scheduling more hangouts before and during the trip. Students also shared some specific items they wished were on the packing list such as extra shirts for each day, snacks, Benadryl cream, water shoes, and additional money.

The post-trip assessment provided students the opportunity to have some of the trip experiences sink in and reflect on those experiences several weeks after the trip. Students were asked two separate questions on the post-trip assessment to name differences and similarities between the US and Costa Rican culture that they observed on the trip and 22 students responded to each question. Several students talked about how the culture in Costa Rica is

more community based than it is in the United States, such as working to benefit the community, caring for the environment, and developing the group. Others mentioned that the people in Costa Rica are friendlier, more open, and more laid back than most people in the US. Another difference noted was the quality of the food and that in Costa Rica is was healthier, fresher, and less processed. There was more variety of idea as students talked about the similarities between the United States and Costa Rica. The most common similarity students wrote about was the similarities between people in general – liking similar music, playing similar games, watching similar movies, and having a strong work ethic. Some other similarities noted included the hospitality of both countries, a desire to learn from one another, having a sense of pride from where you are from, appreciating technology, and working to the best of your ability. A couple of students commented on how different the two countries were while trying to talk about the similarities.

Simply translated, Pura Vida, means “simple life” or “pure life.” However, in Costa Rica, it is more than just a saying, it is a greeting, a positive human quality, and a way of life. On the post-trip assessment, students were asked what aspects, if any, they planned to incorporate into their daily life in the United States. There was a wide range of comments from the 22 responding students. Several trip participants commented on living in the present moment, going with the flow or being less stressed, and expressing positivity and gratitude. A couple of students mentioned continuing something they started doing in Costa Rica such as turning the faucet off when brushing their teeth, taking a shorter shower, using colder water for their shower, and listening to Latin music.

For the last question on the post-trip assessment, participants were asked to explain how the trip challenged their sense of self (if applicable) and 21 wrote a response. For a majority of the respondents, this trip had an impact on them and it did challenge them in some manner. Students discussed getting out of their comfort zone to try new things, being more positive than before, having more fun by not taking everything so seriously. A few students reported being challenged initially by the language differences, but also talked about embracing their own culture more based on this trip. Several of the student leader staff members also commented on begin challenged in their leadership, which allowed them to grow or learn about their leadership style.

### **Service Experiences**

On the pre-trip assessment, participants were asked how they defined service. Almost all of the 25 students responding described service as something for someone else or a community. There were comments such as helping others in need, sharing time, resources, or knowledge, expecting nothing in return, or not receiving any benefit. A few students felt that service was an act that you truly wanted to do and was selfless. There were similar responses from both freshmen and student leaders.

The trip assessment asked participants how their definition of service changed, if at all, after their experience on the trip and 24 students shared their thoughts. Many did not feel their definition changed, but felt that the trip reinforced their definition. Students felt that service was doing what a community wants or needs, expecting nothing in return, and impacting others. A couple of students shared that this trip showed them service, which they now view it different than volunteering. A couple of other students expressed that they learned that they can benefit by doing service because it is so rewarding.

### **Committee Background**

According to its website (<http://fli.tamu.edu>), MSC FLI is a “freshman organization that presents international outreach and service programs which promote cultural understanding and international awareness among students at Texas A&M University.”

## **Project Details**

The email distribution of the post-trip assessment in March 2020 coincided with the move of all courses to online delivery, and shelter at home executive orders caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This change could affect the survey response rate and the feedback provided by students.

The Department of Student Life Studies provides quality assessment services, resources and assessment training for departments in the Texas A&M University Division of Student Affairs and student organizations. Services by Student Life Studies are funded, in part, by the Texas A&M University Advancement Fee. Results of this project and other assessment projects done through Student Life Studies can be found at <https://studentlifestudies.tamu.edu/results/>. Additionally, anyone can follow Student Life Studies on Facebook.

To work with Student Life Studies for future assessment projects, please fill out the Assessment Questionnaire at <https://slsform.dsaapps.tamu.edu/>.

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