

MSC Freshmen Leadership International Costa Rica Service-Learning Trip March 2022

Purpose of Assessment

The Memorial Student Center (MSC) Freshmen Leadership International (FLI) coordinates an international service-learning program in Costa Rica for its members and any freshman in a Freshman Leadership Organization (FLO) each year over spring break. This year, the service-learning experience was from March 12-18, 2022. MSC FLI indicated the purpose of the trip for participants is to learn about another culture, enhance their Spanish language skills, experience the rainforest, and engage with local community members.

Trip participants were assessed at three 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 experience. MSC FLI advisors 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 (96% strongly agreed and 4% agreed). Additionally, students articulated the differences that they observed on the trip. This increased from last year when 88% strongly agreed and 12% 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 the information could be provided earlier to participants; as well as add more Spanish vocabulary lessons before the trip.
- Students reported feeling the most prepared to use reflection to make meaning of this experience on the pre-trip assessment and the trip assessment. Additionally, students described the reflection activities as being valued or beneficial on the trip assessment. This is an improvement from the trip in 2020 when modifying reflection activities was the most common suggestion to better the trip. Advisors and student leaders are encouraged to continue doing reflective activities as they were done in 2022.

Method and Sample

Two assessments were produced using Papersurvey.io®, 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 at the first trip planning and preparation meeting in January 2022. 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 18, 2022. Both surveys were administered to all 24 trip participants, and all completed the survey, yielding a 100% response rate for each survey.

The post-trip assessment was created using Qualtrics®, a software program for creating web-based surveys. It was comprised of four qualitative questions and one demographic question. The post-trip assessment link was emailed to all 24 participants on March 25, 2022. Due to a low response rate, the survey was kept open for an additional week. Non-respondents received up to five reminders before the survey closed on April 12, 2022. Of the 24 students receiving the survey, 21 completed it, for an 88% response rate.

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

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 2022 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 freshman participant, a sophomore (not leading), or a student leader staff member. The student demographics from the pre-trip showed 54% of the participants were freshmen, 17% were sophomores (not leading), and 29% were student leader staff (n=24). The responses to this question on the trip assessment were the same as the pre-trip assessment. Results from the post-trip assessment were slightly different with 48% of the participants being freshmen, 19% were sophomores (not leading) and, 33% were student leader staff (n=21).

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 pre-trip orientation sessions. Table 1, on the following page in descending order for the 2022 trip assessment mean score, displays both the pre-trip and trip responses. Both before leaving and after the trip, students reported feeling most prepared to use reflection to make meaning of this experience. For all statements, students reported feeling more prepared because of the pre-trip orientations on the trip assessment than they were on the pre-trip assessment. Students indicated feeling more prepared for most statements, both on the pre-trip and trip assessments, compared to the last year.

Pre-Trip Orientations Prepared Me...	Very Prepared (3)	Somewhat Prepared (2)	Not At All Prepared (1)	2022 Mean (sd) [n]	2020 Mean (sd) [n]	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n]
PRE – To use reflection to make meaning of this experience	83%	17%	--	2.83 (.38) [24]	2.64 (.57) [25]	†	†
TRIP – To use reflection to make meaning of this experience	100%	--	--	3.00 (.00) [24]	2.79 (.42) [24]	2.76 (.44) [25]	2.91 (.29) [23]
PRE - For traveling logistics of the trip (flight, packing, accommodations, excursions, etc.)	33%	63%	4%	2.29 (.55) [24]	2.28 (.68) [25]	2.68 (.48) [25]	2.74 (.45) [23]
TRIP - For traveling logistics of the trip (flight, packing, accommodations, excursions, etc.)	87%	13%	--	2.87 (.34) [23]	2.63 (.50) [24]	2.96 (.20) [25]	2.83 (.39) [23]
PRE – To explore Costa Rican rainforest	58%	38%	4%	2.54 (.59) [24]	2.20 (.71) [25]	2.36 (.64) [25]	2.74 (.45) [23]
TRIP – To explore Costa Rican rainforest	79%	21%	--	2.79 (.42) [24]	2.79 (.42) [24]	2.84 (.37) [25]	2.78 (.42) [23]
PRE - For engaging in the Costa Rican culture	33%	67%	--	2.33 (.48) [24]	2.48 (.59) [25]	2.56 (.51) [25]	2.74 (.45) [23]
TRIP – For engaging in the Costa Rican culture	79%	21%	--	2.79 (.42) [24]	2.71 (.46) [24]	2.88 (.33) [25]	2.83 (.39) [23]

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 agreed with all statements, especially being able to recognize the differences between the Costa Rican culture and their own and their inputs during reflection activities being valued. These results are similar to the previous years in most cases; however, students were more positive about the reflection periods being beneficial compared to past years.

During the trip, I felt...	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2022 Mean (sd) [n]	2020 Mean (sd) [n]	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n=23]
Able to recognize the differences of the Costa Rica culture and my own	96%	4%	--	--	3.96 (.21) [23]	3.88 (.33) [25]	3.96 (.20) [25]	4.00 (.00)
My input during reflection activities was valued	96%	4%	--	--	3.96 (.20) [24]	3.56 (.58) [25]	3.56 (.51) [25]	3.61 (.58)
The reflection periods at the end of each day were beneficial	96%	4%	--	--	3.96 (.21) [23]	3.40 (.58) [25]	3.64 (.57) [25]	3.78 (.42)
The communication between trip student leaders and trip participants was sufficient	83%	17%	--	--	3.83 (.38) [24]	3.88 (.33) [25]	3.88 (.33) [25]	3.83 (.39)

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 agreed with all statements about their experience after the trip.

After the trip, I felt...	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2022 Mean (sd) [n]	2020 Mean (sd) [n]	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n=23]
More knowledgeable of Costa Rica and the Costa Rican culture due to the excursions (†)	96%	4%	--	--	3.96 (.21) [23]	3.91 (.29) [23]	3.80 (.41) [25]	4.00 (.00)
More knowledgeable of the Costa Rican culture due to my interactions with the local citizens	96%	4%	--	--	3.96 (.21) [23]	3.87 (.34) [23]	3.92 (.28) [25]	4.00 (.00)
More comfortable in an international setting	91%	9%	--	--	3.91 (.29) [23]	3.87 (.34) [23]	3.92 (.28) [25]	3.96 (.21)

Table 3: Learning Outcomes

(† In 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. Most of the respondents appreciated the planning of the trip and said that they did not have any major recommendations. Some common suggestions included having more conversational Spanish practice before the trip, a more specific packing list, spending more time with the kids at the school, and having rest time between activities.

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 cultures that they observed on the trip and 21 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, helping each other, and developing the group. Others mentioned that the people in Costa Rica were 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 the food is healthier, fresher, and less processed. Many students commented that both Costa Rica and the US are highly diverse, but the difference is in how they manage and deal with the diversity. One student said that they found similarities in the structure of the day between Costa Rica and the US. They said that schools taught material that was very similar to that in the US, and also the value of education was similar. Some students noted that the importance of hard work in Costa Rica was similar to that in the US.

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 21 responding students. Several trip participants commented about worrying less about things outside of their control, living an easy-going life, living a more laid-back life, and emphasizing relaxation. Some students also indicated that they would like to continue things that they started doing in Costa Rica like watching the sunrise more often, thinking more about the community, and going with the flow.

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 20 wrote a response. Responses were very different from one another but for most of the respondents, this trip had an impact on them, and it did challenge them in some manner. Students discussed learning how to appreciate little things more and finding different ways of gaining happiness. Some students also talked about becoming more extroverted and easier going.

Service Experiences

On the pre-trip assessment, participants were asked how they defined service. Almost all of the 24 students responding described service as something for someone else or a community. Some comments talked about giving without expecting anything in return, participating in an act where you help someone other than yourself, having an impact on the community, and making others’ lives better.

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. Again, responses were very different from one another but most of the students indicated that the definition of service changed for them after the trip. Some respondents said that now they think that service is more than just about themselves, it is more about the society at large and that it is not materialistic. Some students also talked about how service is an outlet of stress for them.

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.”

Furthermore, students apply for the trip and are selected at the end of October. The students selected for this service-learning experience have regular meetings in the spring semester to prepare for the trip. Students work in teams to help each other learn Spanish, understand the Costa Rican culture, and prepare for the scheduled activities. While in Costa Rica, students work with the local residents on projects in the community. Students also have time to experience Costa Rica by doing excursions such as hiking to a waterfall and zip-lining through the rainforest.

Project Details

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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