

MSC Freshmen Leadership International Costa Rica Service Learning Trip March 2018

Background

According to its website (<http://fli.tamu.edu>), the Memorial Student Center (MSC) Freshmen Leadership International (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.” MSC FLI coordinates one major international travel experience for its members each year over spring break. Again this year, MSC FLI went to Costa Rica on March 9-15, 2018 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 provided a pre-trip assessment, trip assessment, and post-trip assessment at different points during the experience in order to gauge how well the outcomes were met and the overall impact of this experience. This is the ninth time Student Life Studies has worked with MSC FLI to assess this trip.

Method and Sample

The three assessments were produced using Teleform[®], a software program that creates scannable paper surveys and databases. The five-question pre-trip assessment contained three quantitative questions, one qualitative question, and one demographic question. The trip assessment had 14 questions: 11 quantitative, two qualitative, and one demographic. The post-trip assessment was comprised of three qualitative questions and one demographic question. Data from the three assessments were analyzed using SPSS[®], a statistical software package, and Microsoft Excel[®].

The pre-trip assessment was distributed to participants prior to departing on the trip at a meeting on March 7, 2018. The trip assessment was distributed to participants while coming home from the trip on March 15, 2018. The post-trip assessment was administered on April 4, 2018, during a follow-up meeting after returning from the trip. Out of the 23 trip participants, all completed each of the three surveys, yielding a 100% response rate for each instrument.

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 2018 mean order, with comparisons to last year 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.

The student demographics from the pre-trip assessment and post-trip assessment showed 74% of the participants were freshmen and 26% were student leader staff (n=23). Results from the trip assessment were slightly different with 70% of the participants being freshmen and 30% were student staff (n=23).

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, in descending order for the 2018 trip assessment mean, displays both the pre-trip and trip responses. In all areas, the pre-trip orientations were scored higher during the trip than before the trip. Additionally, in 2017, there was a decrease in the trip assessment related to the traveling logistics of the trip; however, this increased in 2018 to be comparable to 2016.

Pre-Trip Orientations Prepared Me...	Very Prepared (3)	Somewhat Prepared (2)	Not At All Prepared (1)	2018 Mean (sd) [n]	2017 Mean (sd) [n]	2016 Mean (sd) [n]	2015 Mean (sd) [n]
PRE - For traveling logistics of the trip (flight, packing, accommodations, excursions, etc.)	74%	26%	--	2.74 (.45) [23]	2.79 (.42) [19]	2.65 (.49) [23]	2.57 (.50) [28]
TRIP - For traveling logistics of the trip (flight, packing, accommodations, excursions, etc.)	83%	17%	--	2.83 (.39) [23]	2.63 (.50) [19]	2.81 (.40) [21]	2.72 (.46) [29]
PRE - For engaging in the Costa Rican culture	74%	26%	--	2.74 (.45) [23]	2.74 (.45) [19]	2.61 (.50) [23]	2.50 (.58) [28]
TRIP - For engaging in the Costa Rican culture	83%	17%	--	2.83 (.39) [23]	2.84 (.38) [19]	2.71 (.46) [21]	2.21 (.49) [29]
PRE - To explore Costa Rican rainforest	74%	26%	--	2.74 (.45) [23]	2.79 (.42) [19]	2.78 (.42) [23]	2.46 (.58) [28]
TRIP - To explore Costa Rican rainforest	78%	22%	--	2.78 (.42) [23]	2.89 (.32) [19]	2.71 (.46) [21]	2.52 (.63) [29]

Table 1: Pre-Trip Orientations

On the trip assessment, participants were also asked if the pre-trip orientations prepared them to use reflection to make meaning of this experience. Almost all students (91%) reported being very prepared and 9% said they were somewhat prepared. No participant indicated not being at all prepared (mean=2.91/3.00; sd=.29; n=23). This was more positive when compared to 2017 when 63% of the students reported being very prepared and 37% reported being somewhat prepared (mean=2.63/3.00; sd=.50; n=23).

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 positive about all statements, especially being able to recognize the differences between the Costa Rica culture and their own. These results are similar to the previous year.

During the trip I felt...	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2018 Mean (sd) [n=23]	2017 Mean (sd) [n=19]	2016 Mean (sd) [n=21]	2015 Mean (sd) [n=29]
Able to recognize the differences of the Costa Rica culture and my own	100%	--	--	--	4.00 (.00)	4.00 (.00)	4.00 (.00)	3.93 (.26)
The communication between trip student leaders and trip participants was sufficient	83%	17%	--	--	3.83 (.39)	3.79 (.54)	3.76 (.44)	3.52 (.57)
The reflection periods at the end of each day were beneficial	78%	22%	--	--	3.78 (.42)	3.74 (.45)	3.76 (.44)	3.48 (.57)
My input during reflection activities was valued	65%	30%	4%	--	3.61 (.58)	3.68 (.58)	3.71 (.46)	3.59 (.50)

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 felt positive on all statements about their experience after the trip. Students reported feeling more knowledgeable of the Costa Rican culture this year compared to the previous years.

After the trip I felt...	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2018 Mean (sd) [n=23]	2017 Mean (sd) [n=19]	2016 Mean (sd) [n=21]	2015 Mean (sd) [n=29]
More knowledgeable of the Costa Rican culture due to the excursions	100%	--	--	--	4.00 (.00)	3.89 (.32)	3.62 (.50)	3.79 (.41)
More knowledgeable of the Costa Rican culture due to my interactions with the local citizens	100%	--	--	--	4.00 (.00)	3.84 (.38)	3.76 (.44)	3.83 (.38)
More comfortable in an international setting	96%	4%	--	--	3.96 (.21)	4.00 (.00)	3.71 (.46)	3.90 (.31)

Table 3: Learning Outcomes

The last question on the trip assessment gave participants the opportunity to recommend improvements for future MSC FLI Costa Rica Service Learning trips. Several students suggested starting the curriculum planning earlier as well as having more time and emphasis on learning Spanish. A couple students also suggested having longer meetings to accomplish the curriculum and learning Spanish. One student recommended looking at the transportation to the airport to lower stress and help everyone get there on time. For the actual trip, suggestions included having more time in the community and making the trip longer. Some student leader staff suggested delegating some tasks to freshmen earlier and calling people out earlier. Additionally, one suggested making the group smaller so there would be increased interactions.

The post-trip assessment provided students the opportunity to have some of the trip experiences sink in and then reflect on those experiences a couple weeks after the trip. Participants were asked to explain how the trip challenged their sense of self (if applicable). While there were a few students who did not feel the trip challenged their sense of self, most felt that it had challenged them in various ways. Several talked about the importance of taking care of themselves in terms of their happiness, stress level etc. Others talked about stepping out of their

comfort zone either through an international experience or in developing relationships with other students all year preparing for the trip. For a couple students, the trip challenged them to think about what they wanted to do with their lives. A few students realized that they had not had as many experiences “being an adult” as they had thought and the trip pushed them to be responsible for themselves.

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 two separate questions to compare and contrast the Pura Vida concept with their daily life in the US. The first question asked students how their daily life in the US is like that Pura Vida concept. Several students said that it was not similar and that life in the US is busier and more hectic and how easy it is to be caught up in the demands, stress, and pressure. Some students talked about how either their life before the trip or changes they were making since coming back from the trip was getting their daily life to be more like the Pura Vida concept. Some of these included meditating, reflecting, focusing on the now, taking things day by day as they come, not stressing about things outside their control, and taking time to relax. When students talked about the second question and how their daily life in the US was different than the Pura Vida concept, almost all students commented on it being different. Students talked about the US culture requiring tasks to be done quickly, being a fast-paced environment, and having pressures, demands, and controlled chaos. One student said that in the US, accomplishments seem to be of higher value than that of the actual person. Students talked about how difficult it is to apply the Pura Vida concept in their life when deadlines and demands do not stop, or that most of their friends and people they spend time with do not apply the Pura Vida concept in their lives.

Service Experiences

On the pre-trip assessment, participants were asked how they defined service. Many students expressed that service was helping others or doing something that was a benefit to others. Additionally, students shared that service could be through big or small actions, was something that made a difference for others, and many talked about it being for either an individual or a community or group. There were similar comments from both freshmen and student leaders.

The trip assessment asked participants how their definition of service changed after their experience on the trip. Several commented that their definition had not changed much, but that the trip reinforced what they believed or gave them a great appreciation of service. Several students talked about service being mutually beneficial and that one side helps or benefits the other, but they also gain something such as joy, happiness, and peace. Additionally, students talked about the need for service to involve communication and coordination to really know the needs of a community, as well as ensuring that the service benefits the community and is not a detriment to the community. It seemed students also understood that coming into a community, even with good intentions of helping, can still put a strain on that community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The participants were again positive about their level of preparation and their experience this year. Additionally, the results indicate that MSC FLI reached their intended outcomes for the international trip. Students articulated getting outside of their comfort zone and that the reflections challenged them. Students articulated learning about the Costa Rica culture. Furthermore, the trip seemed to challenge students’ sense of self and to reflect on this experience. Finally, students seemed to have a strong sense of service from this trip, but also understanding the impact service has on a community.

If changes were made this year in terms of travel logistics, it is recommended to keep those changes moving forward. There were fewer comments made this year similar to previous years about the logistics of the trip. Overall, students seemed very well prepared for the trip and knowing what to expect. There was only one comment related to the travel logistics and that was regarding the transportation to the airport. It may be beneficial to look at

options for this, maybe flying directly out of College Station or taking the shuttle from College Station to Houston or Austin would make this easier. Also, it might keep students from driving from Houston or Austin if they are very tired from the trip and traveling. Finally, students did offer suggestions to plan the curriculum earlier and continue practicing Spanish. The leadership may want to look at options for this such as have meetings for frequently or scheduling the meetings to be slightly longer.

More students discussed Pura Vida and how they see it in their daily lives in the US, but also how they struggle to live this lifestyle once they returned from the trip. Maybe MSC FLI could consider programming options for after spring break that may encourage this concept in their daily lives. Maybe this is planning time to come together to slow down and relax or helping students meditate. This could be helpful for students as they approach the end of the semester and finals shortly after coming back from the trip.

MSC FLI is encouraged to read all the qualitative comments provided to better understand and appreciate the participants' feedback. The leadership is also encouraged to share assessment results with all of those who are a part of the planning process of this trip and other stakeholders. This could include posting the results on the organization website, including information in transition binders, and review the report at the first planning meeting for the 2019 service learning trip.

The results have been fairly consistent over the past few years, MSC FLI may want to determine if these questions are still providing results that help them make improvements to the program. It may not be necessary to assess the experience every year at this point or to focus on different aspects of the experience for different years. Additionally, there were no questions directly focused on leadership or teamwork, which could be areas to consider including in the survey in the future since these were learning outcomes for the experience.

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