

MSC Freshmen Leadership International Costa Rica Service Learning Trip March 2019

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 8-14, 2019 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 in order to gauge how well the outcomes were met and the overall impact of this experience. This is the tenth time Student Life Studies has worked with MSC FLI to assess this trip.

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. Staff members 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 these differences that they observed on the trip. Students reported being more knowledgeable about the differences in culture through their interactions with citizens than through the excursions. MSC FLI may want to explore the value the excursions play on this trip. This could be through talking with the students who just came back from this trip and/or adding questions on either the trip or post-trip assessment. Furthermore, students also reported wanting more time for service during the trip. If the excursions are less impactful, it may be worth not doing them or spending less time on them during the trip.
- Students generally reported being prepared for the trip on both the pre-trip and trip assessments. While still positive results, students indicated they were less prepared for the reflection on the trip; additionally, students this year rated this lower than the previous year. MSC FLI staff and student leaders may want to look at adding reflections to the pre-trip orientation meetings. From the comments, it seems there are journals the freshmen keep as part of the orientation, but it was suggested that those be reviewed each week to ensure freshmen are actually reflecting. The students were less positive about the reflection periods on the trip. Maybe by focusing on reflection more intentionally in the pre-trip orientations, freshmen will have a strong appreciation for the reflection periods during the trip.
- 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. Additionally, MSC FLI may want to specify if the outcomes are for the freshmen specifically, or all students on the trip. Do student leaders have different outcomes?

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 four 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 in January 2019. The trip assessment was distributed to participants while coming home from the trip on March 14, 2019. The post-trip assessment was administered during a follow-up meeting in early April 2019. Of the 25 trip participants, all completed the pre-trip and trip surveys, yielding a 100% response rate for each of these instruments. For the post-trip survey, 24 of the 25 participants completed it, for a 96% response rate.

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 2019 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.

The student demographics from the pre-trip assessment showed 79% of the participants were freshmen and 21% were student leader staff (n=24). Results from the trip assessment and post-trip assessment were slightly different with 71% of the participants being freshmen and 29% were student staff (n=24).

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 2019 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, there was an increase for all three statements on the trip assessment when compared to the previous year.

Pre-Trip Orientations Prepared Me...	Very Prepared (3)	Somewhat Prepared (2)	Not At All Prepared (1)	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n]	2017 Mean (sd) [n]	2016 Mean (sd) [n]
PRE - For traveling logistics of the trip (flight, packing, accommodations, excursions, etc.)	68%	32%	--	2.68 (.48) [25]	2.74 (.45) [23]	2.79 (.42) [19]	2.65 (.49) [23]
TRIP - For traveling logistics of the trip (flight, packing, accommodations, excursions, etc.)	96%	4%	--	2.96 (.20) [25]	2.83 (.39) [23]	2.63 (.50) [19]	2.81 (.40) [21]
PRE - For engaging in the Costa Rican culture	56%	44%	--	2.56 (.51) [25]	2.74 (.45) [23]	2.74 (.45) [19]	2.61 (.50) [23]
TRIP - For engaging in the Costa Rican culture	84%	16%	--	2.84 (.37) [25]	2.83 (.39) [23]	2.84 (.38) [19]	2.71 (.46) [21]
PRE - To explore Costa Rican rainforest	44%	48%	8%	2.36 (.64) [25]	2.74 (.45) [23]	2.79 (.42) [19]	2.78 (.42) [23]
TRIP - To explore Costa Rican rainforest	84%	16%	--	2.84 (.37) [25]	2.78 (.42) [23]	2.89 (.32) [19]	2.71 (.46) [21]

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. Three-fourths of the students (75%) reported being very prepared and 25% said they were somewhat prepared. No participant indicated not being at all prepared (mean=2.75/3.00; sd=.44; n=24). This was a decrease from the previous year when 91% of the students said they were very prepared and 9% reported being somewhat prepared (mean=2.91/3.00; sd=.29; 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 in agreement with all statements, especially being able to recognize the differences between the Costa Rican culture and their own. These results are mostly similar to the previous years.

During the trip, I felt...	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n=23]	2017 Mean (sd) [n=19]	2016 Mean (sd) [n=21]
Able to recognize the differences of the Costa Rica culture and my own	96%	4%	--	--	3.96 (.20) [25]	4.00 (.00)	4.00 (.00)	4.00 (.00)
The communication between trip student leaders and trip participants was sufficient	88%	13%	--	--	3.88 (.34) [24]	3.83 (.39)	3.79 (.54)	3.76 (.44)
The reflection periods at the end of each day were beneficial	67%	29%	4%	--	3.63 (.58) [24]	3.78 (.42)	3.74 (.45)	3.76 (.44)
My input during reflection activities was valued	52%	48%	--	--	3.52 (.51) [25]	3.61 (.58)	3.68 (.58)	3.71 (.46)

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. These results are fairly similar to last year.

After the trip, I felt...	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n=23]	2017 Mean (sd) [n=19]	2016 Mean (sd) [n=21]
More knowledgeable of the Costa Rican culture due to my interactions with the local citizens	92%	8%	--	--	3.92 (.28) [25]	4.00 (.00)	3.84 (.38)	3.76 (.44)
More comfortable in an international setting	92%	8%	--	--	3.92 (.28) [25]	3.96 (.21)	4.00 (.00)	3.71 (.46)
More knowledgeable of the Costa Rican culture due to the excursions	79%	21%	--	--	3.79 (.42) [24]	4.00 (.00)	3.89 (.32)	3.62 (.50)

Table 3: Learning Outcomes

The trip assessment asked participants to recommend improvements for future service learning trips and 25 wrote a response. Both freshmen and student leaders suggested making the trip longer, providing a more detailed or comprehensive packing list, scheduling more time for service, and knowing the others on the trip before leaving. Furthermore, freshmen also suggested requiring more practice in Spanish before going and preparing everyone for all the walking that is done on the trip. Student leaders also recommended requiring attendance at meetings, reviewing journals to ensure freshmen are doing them, having one student leader in each housing building, and offering scholarships to help freshmen pay for the trip.

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 24 students responded to each question. Almost two-thirds of the students responding commented in some manner about a difference between the two cultures was that in Costa Rica everyone treats everyone like

family. They commented on how friendly, welcoming, and accepting people in Costa Rica were to everyone. They also talked about the strong relationships between families and the community that is built in Costa Rica. Additionally, several students commented that Costa Rica had a more relaxed lifestyle and that the food was higher quality and healthier than you find in the United States. The most common similarity students wrote about was that both countries valued education. Additionally, several students commented on the similarities between people in general – liking similar music, playing similar games, having similar hobbies, enjoying a cup of coffee, greeting one another, and longing to be connected to other people.

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 24 responding students. Several talked about being more relaxed or not being so worried and focused on the future and things they cannot control. Others talked about responding to situations more positively, focusing on relationships with others, and being more grateful.

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 23 wrote a response. For a couple of students, this trip did not challenge their sense of self because they had been to Costa Rica before or that they had a good grasp of who they were already. However, for a majority of the trip participants, this trip had an impact on them and it did challenge them in some manner. Students reported being challenged to be more appreciative, have more self-awareness, to seek happiness, to prioritize what is important, and to find balance so they are not as stressed with different situations. A few students talked about looking at relationships or spending time with the people around them. Additionally, a few students mentioned their view of service either changed or was strengthened from this experience.

Service Experiences

On the pre-trip assessment, participants were asked how they defined service. Many of the 25 responding students described service as a selfless act. Additionally, they expressed that service involved helping others or doing something that was a benefit to others. Many reported that providing service involved getting nothing in return; however, others shared that often the one providing the service gains so much by learning about others. 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 and 25 students shared their thoughts. Many freshmen and student leaders expressed that service was not about what you wanted to do or how you wanted to serve, but rather what an individual or a community needs from you. Additionally, both freshmen and student leaders indicated that service involved a relationship with those you are serving and that the one who is serving others often gains from their act of service. There were a few who reported that their definition did not change much, but that the trip enhanced or reinforced what they believed.

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 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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Prepared on: April 16, 2019