

Executive Summary

The Project and the Participants

FEIL has now completed its first international research effort – a one and a half year project designed to explore and assess the impact of intercultural experiences provided through service projects conducted as part of the Federation’s Volunteers in International Partnerships program. This research project, titled “Exploring and Assessing Intercultural Competence,” involved two sending and one receiving Member Organizations: Great Britain, Switzerland, and Ecuador. The project was made possible through a funding grant obtained from the Center for Social Development of the Global Service Institute at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

Designed and directed by FEIL’s educational consultant, Dr. Alvino E. Fantini, the project began in July 2005 and was completed in December 2006, undergoing several stages: In the initial stage, an extensive survey was conducted of the intercultural literature as the basis for developing a comprehensive construct of “intercultural competence” and for developing a tool for its assessment. After translating this instrument into German and Spanish, and adapting it to British English, the tool was then used with several participant groups – alumni, volunteers, and host mentors. The study was conducted through use of a survey questionnaire followed by personal interviews, carried out with the assistance of research assistants in each of the three cooperating countries. The result was the production of a substantial amount of data which were then analyzed to learn more about the impact of these intercultural experiences on the lives and work of both the sojourners and their hosts.

Assertions and Findings

Although most people engaged in intercultural exchange can anticipate the results, this systematic study yielded rich quantitative data (presented through figures, graphs, and statistics) and qualitative data (anecdotes, comments, and quotes) that were important and insightful. The analysis of the data was based on ten assertions, all of which were strongly supported by the evidence:

- that intercultural competence involves a complex of abilities
- that learning the host language affects intercultural development in positive ways
- that intercultural experiences are life-altering
- that participant choices made during their sojourn produce certain intercultural consequences
- that all parties in intercultural contact are affected
- that service programs offer unique opportunities for sojourners and hosts, beyond traditional exchanges
- that people are changed in positive ways as a result of this experience
- that returnees lean toward specific life choices, life partners, life styles, values and jobs, as a result of their experience
- that returnees often engage in activities that further impact on others in positive ways, and
- that their activities further the organizational mission.

Although most every one engaged in intercultural activities believes these assertions intuitively and perhaps experientially, the statistics and comments obtained provided substantial evidence that strongly supported all of these assertions. For example, specific attributes were cited as extremely important to the success of an intercultural experience with the suggestion that there

may be an hierarchical sequence of importance among them. Participants gained dramatic insights about the significance of being able to communicate in the host tongue, both to reduce barriers as well as to enable participation. As one alumna wrote, “Language was the key to everything, to communicating and understanding the local culture, and to my overall success.” And another added: “Language was vital and very important to my success”.

Alumni also made numerous comments about how their lives were changed, as well as the new directions their lives had taken after return. But most interesting is the fact that the mentors were also significantly affected through their contact with foreigners, reinforcing the notion that both sojourners and hosts are changed in the process of intercultural contact. As participants returned home and engaged in socially oriented activities, it becomes clear that they in turn had significant impact upon still others (the multiplier effect). Finally, clear and detailed documentation of all of these results, in turn, provides important evidence that The Experiment indeed furthers its vision and mission through the experiences and activities of its participant members. To state this another way: the program experience becomes the entree to a life of education and service on the part of those who participated.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

From the beginning, this project was envisioned as a pilot project to be followed by an expanded research effort that might eventually involve all Member Organizations worldwide. It is clear that many benefits accrue to collaborating MOs quite aside from the research results obtained. For example, this project had various effects on the participating MOs: a) first of all, it engaged three Member Organizations in a process of learning that will enhance their efforts in several areas in the future; b) it improves understanding of and furthers FEIL’s goals and modus operandi; c) it has the potential to improve delivery of volunteer service projects (and other programs as well) – from concept to marketing, selection to training, and program implementation to evaluation; and d) it can further the development of the intercultural competencies of future participants and possibly of mentors and hosts as well. Clearly, the results can have both important marketing implications as well as educational implications, if carefully considered and taken into account.

Finally, research efforts of this type also contribute important knowledge to the field of intercultural education with regards to international and intercultural programs, especially as concerned with the identification, development, assessment, and impact of intercultural competencies on the lives of all those involved. As an “acknowledged leader in international intercultural exchange,” it is indeed fitting for the Experiment Federation to undertake projects of this sort – for itself and on behalf of others. For this reason, the project’s final phase involves ongoing and widespread dissemination of the results through articles in professional journals and presentations at relevant conferences.

[NOTE: A detailed report of this research study is available in hardcopy and in electronic format, posted on the Federation EIL website at <http://www.experiment.org>]