

International Service-Learning: An Experiential Education Opportunity for Student Nurses

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What is International Service-Learning?

What is international service-learning, and what is its value to this experience? According to Nickols and colleagues (2013), "International service-learning is an increasingly popular pedagogy that spans many disciplines. It provides an alternative to traditional study abroad programs and an expansion of the learning processes available in domestic service-learning" (p. 97).

Bringle and colleagues (2011) further describe international service-learning (ISL) as "a high-impact pedagogy with the potential to improve students' academic attainment, contribute to their personal growth, and develop global civic outcomes. The international service experience provides opportunities for additional learning goals, activities, and relationships that are not available in a domestic service-learning course or in a traditional study abroad course. The service experience develops reflection while shedding light on and providing an added dimension to the curricular component of the study abroad course" (p. 1). Jacoby (1996) shares that "[s]ervice-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (p. 5).

Chan and colleagues (2021) share that "ISL is conceptualized as an intersection of three educational components: service-learning, study abroad, and international education. Its potential benefits include increases in students' intercultural competence and sense of global citi-

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zenship" (p. 1), while Gregorová and colleagues (2025) "consider international service-learning as a type of international community-engaged learning (ICEL), which aligns with the definition of ICEL as an experiential education process involving collaborative efforts among students, teachers, and societal partners to tackle global challenges" (p. 128).

As shared, there are many interpretations of ISL, with commonalities including experiential education that combines academic study with community service abroad. It is designed to provide students with a deeper understanding of international issues and cultures through a combination of academic learning, hands-on service, and reflection on the experience.

What is Experiential Education?

The nursing profession extensively uses experiential education through clinical practice, simulation, and interprofessional collaboration to bridge the gap between theory and hands-on practice. This approach helps students build clinical judgment, confidence, and critical thinking skills by providing real-world and simulated scenarios for learning. According to Lewis & Williams (1994), "Experiential learning is a process through which individuals learn by directly en-

gaging in an experience, reflecting on that experience, and applying the insights gained to future situations. This concept was formalized by psychologist and education theorist David Kolb, who posited that experience is the foundation of learning and development" (p. 7). Butler and colleagues (2019) share that "Experiential education can facilitate student critical thinking improvement. However, this method is more than learning by doing, active learning, simulations, or incorporating real-world information in instruction. Instead, it requires students to Do, Reflect, Think, and Apply" (p. 1). While Grace and colleagues (2019) share that "Experiential learning is widely used in health courses to develop students' clinical skills," (p. 1) van de Water and colleagues (2024) note that "Students often seek opportunities to enrich their classroom learning. Providing students the chance to engage in research studies or global health projects allows for experiential enrichment." (p. 1).

Implementation of International Service Learning into Colleges of Nursing

Articles reviewed noted the inherent value of international service learning

Box 1. Typical Concerns:

and experiential education; however, there seems to be a gap in utilization of these opportunities in nursing colleges, which creates an opportunity for both faculty and students alike who are open to stepping outside their comfort zones to travel to another country to render much-needed health care to underserved populations. A few myths that challenge this opportunity are that the faculty member needs to speak the language of the host country, and that they need to have extensive knowledge of the host country and resources to make reservations for the hotels, assemble a local health care team and establish a clinic site for the health care experiences, arrange for transportation, screen the restaurants for proper food preparation, hire interpreters, know the Ministry of Health protocols and guidelines, etc. Some faculty have indeed incorporated international service learning experiences for their Colleges of Nursing by working with a colleague or a friend or relative in another country, with the onus of responsibility being on that person to make all of the arrangements noted, and more; however, those faculty are far and few between as to do so burdens them with a good majority of the planning, which on top of a heavy teaching schedule can be very problematic.

Taking that burden off faculty is the Study Abroad Office in colleges/universities, which can help with some of the logistics related to travel and accommodations; however, they are quite limited in their ability to make all the necessary arrangements for the in-country experiences. These responsibilities are shouldered by a host of external third-party companies, including destination management companies, logistics providers, program providers, and affiliates.

Before initiating an ISL opportunity within a College of Nursing, there are several considerations, including *planning and institutional approval, ethical community partnerships, curriculum development, student preparation and support, and program evaluation and sustainability.*

Phase 1 - Planning and institutional approval starts with securing institutional commitment. This involves gaining support from your nursing school and university administration by clearly defining the course's goals, including how it will enhance the curriculum, promote cultural competence, and prepare students for a globalized healthcare environment. Additionally, logistics need to be determined, including the location, duration (short-term: [7 to 14 days]; long-

Student Concerns:

- I heard that there is an opportunity to go on a service-learning, health care-focused trip. Is this a good opportunity for me?
- I don't speak any language other than English; how will I communicate?
- Is this experience truly beneficial for the community, or is it a "medical tourism" trip primarily for my benefit?
- What happens to the patients after I leave? How will I know that the care provided is not left incomplete and that there is proper follow-up after I leave?
- How can I prepare for and navigate cultural differences?
- How will this opportunity help me to develop and apply my limited clinical skills in a new and challenging environment?
- How does the host country's health care system compare to what we have in the United States, and what can be learned from the differences?
- Beyond clinical skills, how can this experience contribute to my professional growth and my understanding of global health?
- What kind of pre-departure training or preparation is necessary, including learning about the local language, culture, and common health issues?
- What safety protocols are in place while I am in the host country?
- What happens if I get sick?
- What are my rooms like? Are they clean and safe?
- Is the food okay? Can I drink the water?
- What kind of support will be available while I am abroad, including mentorship and assistance with unexpected challenges?
- What are the costs associated with the trip, and are there any funding opportunities or scholarships available?
- How can this experience influence or align with my career goals in global health or other fields?
- How can this experience help me when I apply for residency programs and future positions?

Parental Concerns:

- Is the country safe?
- Will my child be able to call home daily?
- Are there adults overseeing their activities?
- Is their hotel/accommodation clean and safe?

Faculty Concerns:

- Is the country safe?
- What are the specific health and safety risks associated with the location?
- Is their hotel/accommodation clean and safe?
- What comprehensive emergency protocols are in place for situations like a medical crisis, natural disaster, or civil unrest?
- How can I safeguard against students getting sick?
- How do I prevent drug and alcohol abuse?
- Do I need to teach skill sets, or does the affiliate/logistics provider assist?
- Can I customize the itinerary?
- How will I communicate with the affiliate/logistics providers and the local health care team?
- I want to include reflection and journaling; is this a possibility?
- Are there enough translators available, as I only speak English?
- Are there measures in place to prevent students from practicing outside their scope of practice?
- How is consent obtained for treatment?
- Can this experience build a long-term, sustainable partnership with a specific community, or is it a "one and done" trip?

term), and the structure of the experience. To assist with logistics such as location, duration, and so forth, it is beneficial and highly recommended to partner with a third-party provider, such as a destination management company, logistics provider, program provider, or affiliate. Logistics providers such as ISL will manage all logistics, from arrival at the host country airport to departure from the host country airport and everything in

between. This includes providing security, transportation, hotel reservations, meal planning, initiating local hospital relationships, establishing clinic sites, preparing communities for the health care experience, health care team development, hiring local Doctors and Pharmacists, scheduling and teaching medical orientation as well as daily classes and seminars, organizing daily reflections and preclinic briefings, arranging for

attendance and participation at cultural events, and so much more.

Additionally, ISL encourages faculty to visit one of its 11+ countries for 3 days to explore its facilities, clinic sites, hotels, and more. The in-country experience is at no cost to faculty who decide to pursue this opportunity. At this phase, student funding should also be addressed through a clear financial plan that may include university-provided funds, external scholarships, or program fees. Logistics providers, such as ISL, provide additional scholarships for students.

Phase 2 - Ethical community partnerships involve a variety of factors, such as building long-term, reciprocal relationships, focusing on capacity-building within the community rather than creating dependency, and establishing local control by ensuring that the host community and local health care providers have real control over the program. Projects should address needs identified by the community, and it is critical to get community input. In preparation for community work, it is important to clearly define student roles to avoid taking work away from local professionals. For instance, students can focus on health promotion and education rather than direct care, unless appropriate supervision is provided. Finally, it is important to set expectations regarding ethical guidelines. Work with the community to establish clear rules, including protocols for photography, patient consent, and the right to refuse care. Many of these latter challenges can be addressed and completed by the logistics companies.

Phase 3 – Curriculum development involves aligning the ISL experience with course objectives. Possibilities include integrating the service-learning experience directly into core nursing coursework, such as community health, public health policy, or developing a stand-alone elective. Doing so ensures that the experience helps students meet specific course competencies. Logistics providers, like ISL, also support faculty with sample syllabi for course development and an ISL Nursing Faculty Guidebook that supports the development of the ISL experience ... from beginning to end! An additional opportunity for course development would be to incorporate a service-learning framework where a structured model could include the following stages:

- Investigation: Students research the host country's health system and community needs.

Box 2. Typical Itineraries:

A typical weekly itinerary for a standard 9-day trip with International Service-Learning (ISL) is as follows:

- Saturday: Flight to destination country / Welcome dinner
- Sunday: All-day medical orientation
- Monday: Home visits / Clinic / Evening Seminars / Reflection
- Tuesday: Clinic / Evening Seminars / Reflection
- Wednesday: Clinic / Evening Seminars / Reflection
- Thursday: Clinic / Evening Seminars / Reflection
- Friday: Clinic / Evening Seminars / Reflection
- Saturday: Recreation Day
- Sunday: Depart

A typical daily itinerary for a standard 9-day trip with ISL is as follows:

- 7:00 am-8:00 am Breakfast
- 8:00 am-9:00 am Travel to Clinic
- 9:00 am-12:00 pm Clinic
- 12:00 pm-1:00 pm Lunch
- 1:00 pm-3:30 pm Clinic
- 3:30 pm-4:30 pm Case Discussion
- 4:30-5:30 pm Return to Hotel
- 5:30 pm-6:30 pm Seminar
- 6:30-7:30 pm Dinner
- 7:30 pm-10:00 pm Reflections / Activities

Typical Seminars for a standard 9-day trip with ISL are as follows:

- Pharmacology / Medication Calculations
- Medicinal / Tropical Plants
- Health Assessment / History & Physical Exam / Vital Signs
- Suturing / Injections
- Charting
- Medical terminology in language of host country

- Preparation: Students prepare by learning about local culture and health issues, developing basic language skills, and learning about the interpreter process.
- Action: Students engage in the service-learning activity on-site.
- Reflection: Students engage in critical reflection through journaling, group discussions, or structured assignments.
- Demonstration: Students share their learning with peers and faculty.

Phase 4 – Student preparation and support involve implementing comprehensive training. Before departure, students should complete modules on:

- Cultural sensitivity: Moving beyond simple cultural awareness toward cultural humility.
- The social determinants of health: Understanding how factors like poverty and access to resources affect health outcomes.
- Ethical considerations: Including patient privacy and the impact of the student's presence on the community.
- Team dynamics: Preparing for inter-professional and cross-cultural teamwork.

- Medical terminology: Common medical phrases in the language of the host country
- Interpreter process: Develop an awareness and understanding of the "triadic relationship" specific to the interpreter process and role-play the process.

On-site and post-trip support are critical for the experiential component and should include:

- Offer guided reflection: Use guided reflection sessions to help students process moral distress and conflicting feelings that can arise from witnessing immense need.
- Conduct evaluations: Collect feedback from students, faculty, and community partners to evaluate the program's effectiveness and address challenges like language barriers or lack of resources.

Phase 5 - Program evaluation and sustainability involves measuring the impact of the experience by analyzing student reflections and evaluating community benefits, and by considering how the course has increased cultural competence, critical thinking, and awareness of

global health disparities. To ensure program sustainability and long-term success, it is recommended to:

- Maintain regular communication with the community partner.
- Address threats to continuity, such as faculty turnover.
- Explore interdisciplinary collaboration with other departments to share resources and perspectives.

Program and Student Benefits of International Service Learning - Experiential Education

In a research study of the lived experience of BSN and MSN students participating in a multidisciplinary service-learning course in a rural, underserved village in Belize, Main and colleagues (2013) shared that “international service-learning opportunities increase students’ awareness of their place in a global society and the potential contribution they can make in society. For the past decade, service and experiential learning in higher education, including nursing education, has become increasingly important. Simply put, service and experiential learning combine community service activities with a student’s academic studies to enrich the academic experience. As faculty, we feel the goal of baccalaureate and graduate nursing education is to produce an educated professional who will become a responsible citizen” (p. 1). In an article supporting the empowerment of nursing students through service-learning, Amrein (2023) notes, “Nursing students are immersed in live patient scenarios, offering a setting to bridge the gap between didactic learning and clinical practice. Students are allowed to demonstrate hands-on knowledge and social skills in the experience” (p. 1). In an article supporting the benefits of international service-learning, Van Auken (2019) summarizes that participation addresses community needs, offers practical experiences, interactions, and intercultural conversations, and requires reflection to foster a broader understanding and appreciation, leading to becoming a global citizen.

In a research study of nursing students’ experiences of communication in a multilingual and multicultural clinical environment, Ashipala & Matundu (2023) share that “focusing on the experiences of nursing students in multilingual and multicultural clinical environments has revealed that language barriers in those environments are seen as

hindrances to nursing students achieving their optimal clinical learning outcomes. Yet research has shown that multilingual clinical environments will become even more common in the future” (p. 1). In an article highlighting the benefits and challenges of caring for international patients, Cawcutt and Wilson (2016) note that many international patients feel anxious, isolated, and vulnerable, with language barriers and lack of interpreter services often augmenting the unsettled emotions, which supports the importance of having at the bare least a minimum of secondary language skills as well as an awareness of interpreter services and the process; a skillset that is derived from being involved in an ISL experience.

In a research study of nursing students’ involvement in short-term international exchange programs, Sletnes and colleagues (2025) shared that “the globalization of healthcare is advancing, and nurses need knowledge and skills to care for an increasingly culturally diverse patient population ... and by integrating international activities into nursing degree programs, it enhances students’ professional readiness. It also equips them to contribute effectively to global health initiatives, making these competencies increasingly critical in a rapidly globalizing world” (p. 1). In an article on the importance of international experiences for nurses, Long (2016) notes “Through many opportunities to volunteer abroad in nursing, students can make personal home visits, where they may get the chance to assess the sanitation of outhouses, rain barrels commonly used for drinking water, and safety of wood burning stoves, which they would never see in the United States. Being able to make the visual connection between the use of a smoky wood-burning stove in a one-room home and the resultant chest congestion, dry cough, and red eyes seen in the clinic is especially powerful” (p. 1). In an article supporting the preparation of undergraduates for the global future of health care, Amerson (2019) shares that “Global health opportunities to work in low resource countries or settings and the influx of immigrant populations necessitate that health professionals be prepared to deliver health care with a global perspective; yet, the content-laden programs of health-related disciplines frequently have a limited curriculum related to global health” (p. 1).

Emrani and colleagues, (2024) note that “The essential elements of service-based learning include obligation, critical

thinking, being two-sided, leadership development, and meaningful service experience. In service-based learning programs, students commit to carrying out planned service, critically analyze it, and identify real public problems to develop citizenship commitment skills, effective planning, and appropriate leadership skills” (p. 1). In a research study on service-learning experiences that promote students’ learning in higher education, Choi and colleagues (2023) found that “the self-reflection processes – beyond the critical reflection on the service-learning activity itself – played an important role in leading participants to further expanded learning processes related to career paths outside of service-learning programs. These findings indicate that a more comprehensive student self-reflection process throughout service-learning activities can be a critical source of deeper learning” (p. 1).

Kohlbray (2016) reports in a research study of the impact of ISL on nursing students that “The research findings support nursing education program use of international service-learning immersion experiences to foster cultural competence in nursing students. Findings from student participants demonstrated and articulated that these program experiences strengthen the process of becoming culturally competent. The research findings support the inclusion of international service-learning experiences with debriefing and reflective learning as effective teaching strategies” (p. 1). Supporting the role of experiential learning, Kong (2021) shares that “[Experiential learning] is a successful teaching method facilitating active learning through providing real-world experiences in which learners interact and critically evaluate course material and become involved with a topic being taught” (p. 1).

Conclusion

As a 20+ year veteran of international health care and a 15+ year leader of nursing students on ISL trips, I can personally attest to the value of these experiential health care experiences. I have seen growth in my students through service-learning experiences, and, notably post-trip, I have observed growth in maturity, self-confidence, and, most importantly, their clinical care skills. Students self-report their comfort level with patient interactions, especially with patients who are limited English proficient (LEP), and report greater confi-

dence in their ability to take vital signs, assess patient needs, and interact more effectively as members of a healthcare team. It has also been my experience that when faculty-led trips were not available in a College of Nursing, because an ISL experience had not been integrated into an existing course, cohorts of nursing students have traveled independently with support of a logistics provider such as ISL and have had a similar in-country experience to their peers who went on faculty-led trips. That said, as a faculty member with institutional support, I truly enjoyed the opportunity to be with my students on an ISL experience. However, if a college does not yet have an ISL program integrated into a course, know that the international opportunity is just as beneficial for independent cohorts if they work with logistics providers such as International Service-Learning (www.islonline.org). To learn more about international service-learning and hear from students and faculty who have experienced international service-learning trips, check out the podcast, *International Service Learning: Experiential Medical Education*. **DN**

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