

# Short Immersion Trips for Rural Students in Social Work

Joseph Squillace\*  
*MacMurray College, USA*

## **Abstract**

Short term immersion trips for undergraduate college students present multiple opportunities for growth and learning beyond the classroom environment. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a short term immersion trip for rural social work students in a small college setting and their understanding of particular social work competencies. The intensive two-night, three day trip incorporated not only volunteer community service work, but also visits to social service agencies, interviews with social workers, and visits to MSW programs. Students were provided a survey with open-ended questions post-trip experience. Immersion trips had a positive impact on student perceptions of vocational identity. The research supports previous literature that providing opportunities for students to experience persons and situations beyond the classroom may in fact broaden their commitments to reflection and action. Immersion trips may also allow rural social work students to become more goal-focused, including plans for graduate education.

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\*Assistant Professor, Social Work, MacMurray College, 447 East College, Jacksonville, IL 62650.  
joseph.squillace@mac.edu

## **Introduction**

Short term immersion trips for undergraduate college students, sometimes referred to as alternative spring break trips, present multiple opportunities for growth and learning beyond the classroom environment. They provide a bridge between classroom learning and real world application. Immersion trips are one model under the larger concept of community service and service learning, which now includes various activities such as once-a-week service as part of a course, once per semester campus wide events, campus kitchens, federal work study, retreats, campus service organizations, summer internships, and immersion trips. A broader view of immersion trips include Study Tours for credit, community service trips between semesters or during spring break, and may be domestic or include international locations. The primary coordinators of trips may be campus ministry offices, student life offices, or faculty and department programs.

Immersion trips are an important tool in service learning because they provide the opportunity for self-reflection about personal goals and other aspects of one's life, such as civic responsibility, social justice, and one's understanding of poverty and discrimination. Community service is an integral part of any excursion. Depending on the activities of the trip and how it is designed, one of the most important aspects is the development of memorable relationships, typically with individuals that a student would not otherwise normally interact with, such as persons experiencing homelessness.

Some trips are designed to be curricular courses for credit, which may mean tuition costs that many students cannot afford. Others may be designed as co-curricular experiences. Most undergraduate trips are typically designed for the 18-22 year old college cohort, which consists of full-time students with fewer financial constraints. These trips have been shown to have high value for this population in terms of learning outcomes and satisfaction with their college or university. However, there is often limited participation by students who are non-traditional students, as they are working a necessary job to pay for school, or have families they cannot be away from for very long. In addition, there is limited research on the effect these trips have on students from rural regions.

The author had previously participated as a chaperone in multiple week long spring break immersion trips, and participated in extensive activities

dedicated to service learning as a faculty member while at a mid-size Catholic university in an urban region of the Midwest. However, the author joined a small, rural college faculty with many non-traditional students, and students who had little to no experience with urban poverty and social problems. The college had not had any service learning immersion trips in over 35 years. In 2011, social work students at this small rural college began to advocate for the creation of an annual immersion trip. The institution does not have a full time service learning coordinator or community service or campus ministry offices. However, the college's mission includes the phrase "to transform the lives of our students," thus a short-term immersion trip provides a mechanism for the college to achieve its mission.

In addition, professional social work has transformed over the years from its own unique academic discipline to a professional practice competency-based education (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). In social work undergraduate education, service is not just about community service, but training for service in professional practice. Short-term immersion trips can supplement a program's explicit curriculum by providing opportunities to experience professional practice and broaden knowledge of theories outside the classroom. In addition to enhancing limited understanding of the impact of immersion trips on rural students, the author had the goal of learning whether these trips have any impact on social work students' understanding of the professional competencies. Little research has been conducted that links immersion trips with social work competencies. While much research in the area of service learning focuses on students' motivations to participate in experiential learning, there is little insight into competencies acquired from a student's perspective.

There is a dearth of service learning research dedicated to populations that do not fit the traditional undergraduate population. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a short-term immersion trip for rural social work students in a small college setting, including their understanding of particular social work competencies. Evidence suggests that first-year and sophomore students perceive service learning experiences to be more novel and thus are associated with greater learning outcomes (Bowman, Brandenberger, Mick, & Smedley, 2010). In addition, studies show that alternative spring break trips develop positive perceptions of poverty and those living in it (Gumpert &

Kraybill-Greggo, 2005). However, non-traditional students may be more likely to come from that population, having utilized public benefit services themselves.

This study is also designed to explore the impact of a spring break trip on social work students' perceptions of competency-based social work practice, and to expand understanding of the types of outcomes students derive from an intentionally designed immersion trip with varied professional activities, not just charity-based community service. The following questions served to guide the development of the survey instrument:

1. Could social work student competencies (or perceived understanding of the competencies) be affected by such a short-term immersion trip?
2. Might a short-term immersion experience have meaningful impact on rural and non-traditional students' learning and professional development?

### **Review of Literature**

Immersion trips integrate theoretical concepts of community-based learning. Service trips are now designed to have some measured impact on any number of factors, primarily cognitive and emotional. A brief synopsis of prior studies shows that immersion trips have helped students develop a greater sense of social commitment (Ngai, 2006); a growth in ethnic consciousness and cultural awareness (Flannery, 1999); a stronger sense of environmental sensitivity (Metzger & McEwen, 1999); significant increases in students' compassion levels (Plante, Lackey & Hwang, 2009); a better understanding of oneself, the community, and others (Rhoades & Neurerer, 1998); more commitments to further service (McCarthy, 1994); a greater ability to cope with stress (Mills, Bersamina & Plante, 2007); improved academic achievement (Gray, Geschwind, Ondaatje, Robyn, Klein, Sax, Astin, & Astin, 1996); and improved critical thinking skills (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

Previous research suggests longer time blocks for immersion provide greater opportunities for learning than less intense immersions (Eyler & Giles, 1999). However, Bowman et al. (2010) found no difference in orientations toward equality, justice, and social responsibility for students in one-credit, short-term (2-7 day) immersion courses compared to three-credit longer time duration immersions. Ultimately, longer service duration does not necessarily result in more or better learning and development (Bowman, et al, 2010).

Professional development is a critical aspect of social work education. The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) defines competencies as "measurable practice behaviors that are comprised of knowledge, values, and skills" (3). Quinn-Lee & Olsen-McBride (2012) found immersion trips were associated with changes in universal diverse orientation for undergraduate social work students. Being able to conduct community service as part of an identifiable group has been shown to strengthen member commitment (Youniss & Yates, 1997), so having a group within a single major may enhance professional commitment. Mills, Bersamina, and Plante (2007) found immersion trips positively impact vocational identity. Immersion trips may provide an opportunity for undergraduate social work students to develop practice competencies essential for professional practice.

## **Method**

### *Immersion Experience*

As recommended by Bowman et al. (2010), the trip was designed to take students out of their comfort zone for at least a minimal period. The quality of the educational experience on an immersion trip is critical in achieving the desired outcome. Albert (1996) outlines five different design orientations of immersion programs: civic intentions, social justice, personal development, professional development, and spiritual and moral development. Professional development outcomes "incorporate strategies that offer students opportunities for values clarification, refining personal and career choices, and practicing professional skills" (Albert, 1996, 185). Thus, as a professional practice social work program, activities beyond simply volunteer community service were integrated into the learning experience. Both trips took place in a large, Midwestern, urban area. Expenses were paid through Social Work Club funding (the program's student-run campus organization). The professor who accompanied the group gave up spring break "vacation time" to provide oversight to the group. As all students participating were social work students, it was necessary to integrate activities focused on practice and professional duties. The intensive two-night, three-day trip incorporated not only volunteer community service work, but also visits to social service agencies, interviews with social workers, and visits to Master in Social Work (MSW) programs.

Students slept in a church and ate at the soup kitchen with consumers during service there. They participated in the soup kitchen, serving homeless

individuals twice per day, and received a tour of agencies that provide homeless services in a 20-block urban area. The group visited agencies with professional social workers and clients (services including: incarcerated mothers and re-entry, substance abuse, and domestic violence). As the MSW is the “preferred degree” in the profession, and one aspect of the school’s mission is to prepare students for graduate work, we visited one or two MSW programs per trip, with the intention of providing an orientation for goal-directed behavior. Lastly, the students met with a social worker who grew up in the rural area near the college, but is now a practitioner in the urban region.

### *Data Collection*

Qualitative methods were preferred to quantitative given the extremely small sample of students participating in the trips and study. The present study utilized a survey design with data collected through an open-ended structured questionnaire completed by each respondent. The MacMurray College Committee to Protect Human Subjects approved the application protocol for research in the spring 2013 semester (CPHS #AY1213.4). The questions on the instrument “mirrored” language from particular CSWE social work competencies. Students completed the questionnaire and returned it to the investigator, who coded the questionnaires so the responses were anonymous. Nine of the ten students returned the survey. While this sample is small, it may reflect a larger trend, explaining why rural studies are less frequent in scholarly journals because researchers have access to larger urban samples.

### *Participants*

Ten total students participated in two trips in 2012 and 2013. Four students attended the 2012 trip and seven students attended the 2013 trip (one having attended both years, so a unique total of 10). All are from small Midwestern farming communities. For purposes of this study, a traditional student was defined as an 18-22 year old, full-time student who is primarily at one institution for all four years of her or his undergraduate education. No standard definition of “non-traditional student” exists (Kim, 2007). Non-traditional student characteristics vary, but these students are typically over 24 years of age, work full time, and have dependents to support (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2010). We have included transfer students from community colleges in our definition, as this was a growing population in the social work program, and they are often working many hours outside of school. In addition, first-year transfer students may not fully identify with the institution yet in comparison to

their junior (3<sup>rd</sup> year) counterparts, and they typically live independently from their parents.

Four students identified as traditional four-year students 18-22 years of age; four students were transfer students and one was a non-traditional working parent and veteran of the armed services. All nine students were in part-time employment in their communities to help defray the costs of college and cover living expenses, averaging 24.4 hours per week at work. Four of the students came from families that have been enrolled in public benefit programs.

## **Results**

### *Rurality and Difference*

In terms of a rural identity, the findings were not as strong as expected. Students may have had prior experiences in urban regions and therefore, the impact of an urban experience was not as large as anticipated. However, the rurality of their prior experiences was most prominent in responding to the survey question related to the “diversity and difference” social work competency (CSWE Competency 4). All 9 students responded affirmatively that they experienced diversity and difference, specifically referring to the homeless population at the kitchen during volunteer service (but not when referring to the social work agencies visited). Language used by most students focused on how coming from a rural area they never interacted with the homeless, and this population was outside their experience of people they are “surrounded by on a daily basis.” One student responded that she “experienced a lot of different things that I wasn’t used to due to growing up in a small town...including...city life, expansion of services in city [sic], homeless population, large population, and diversity of people in the area.” A second theme related to the scope of homelessness, whether it was seeing so many in one location, or the different subpopulations such as mothers, infants, or veterans. All respondents greater identified with becoming more competent in understanding diversity for social work practice as a result of the immersion trip.

### *Identify as a Social Worker (Competency 1)*

Two primary themes emerged from the responses regarding vocational identity. First, responses of four students demonstrated that visiting various social work settings provided the opportunity to learn more about the broad expanse of ways social workers serve clients. “It helped me identify the role I play” and “made me understand and connect to what a social worker does on a

daily basis” describe the “options” in the field that a student of social work may choose. Integrating visits to social workers in agency settings appeared to broaden their understanding of what social workers do, and increased identification with the profession. One senior student reported that the volunteer service at the soup kitchen did not help her identify more as a social worker, but visiting social work practitioners and agencies allowed her to reflect on the importance of adequate salaries for social workers and conflicts of interest in the field. The second theme that emerged was that experiencing poverty (through volunteer service at the soup kitchen for the homeless population) solidified their identification with the profession and its purpose.

The second survey question inquired as to whether the immersion trip helped inform and guide specific practice interests. Three students narrowed their professional interests through contact with the homeless population by stating their interest or lack of interest in particular fields: “geriatrics is a field that I am not intended [sic] to go into”; “I enjoy working with children and young adults” more so than older adults; “I would like to get my MSW with a focus on military culture and veterans” because there are many homeless veterans, while one student narrowed her interest to gerontology based on a visit to an MSW program. Two students focused specifically on the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective in social work, responding that the trip provided “real examples” of the connectedness between the client/family environment and social worker’s work environment.

One practice behavior associated with identifying as a professional social worker relates to a commitment to personal reflection and self-correction, therefore one survey question inquired as to whether the trip helped one become more reflective and self-aware. There was incredible variation in the response to this question, and no one theme emerged. Two students had futuristic perspectives: “I am able to prepare myself a little better for things to come in the future” and “it made me think about what I would do in certain situations.” Two stated they were “more aware of my own biases,” and another mentioned “the importance of building relationships with other social workers.” Another student stated that the experience improved critical thinking about social problems, and two expressed gratitude about their lives and basic needs being met. While there was great variation in responses, the students’ insights demonstrate an

understanding of the importance of continuous self-reflection and its relation to external contributions to the profession of social work.

*Social Justice and Human Rights (Competency 5)*

This competency also had a great deal of variation in responses. The core themes from respondents revolved around the fact that the immersion trip provided “real life” experiences of the homeless, that it was frustrating to see how individuals live or are treated by others, and that it assisted reflection on the desire to make changes in the lives of others and society. This focus on individual experience was unexpected, as social justice and human rights focus on systemic problems. Built-in discussion and reflection time on an immersion trip for reflection on structural causes of poverty may be valuable to integrate on future trips.

*Critically Analyze People and their Environments (Competency 7)*

While the responses lacked a consistent theme, there was both overlap with other responses from previous questions, and also a richness of responses. Again, expression of being able to see “real life” for those in hardship needing services provided the opportunity for analysis and reflection, inquiring into the “complexity” of personal causes behind homelessness and obstacles to meeting basic needs. Two students expressed that they applied social work Person-in-Environment (PIE) concepts learned from class to analyze a homeless individual’s stories, one in particular remarking on her experience with a homeless individual that “chose” to be homeless to escape an even worse environment. Another reflected on the contrasts between the environment of the service center and wealthier neighborhoods the group drove through to get to other trip destinations, and how that impacts behavior. For one student, interacting with service providers who “perform selfless acts on a daily basis is very powerful.” Overall, student perceptions of the importance of environment appeared to be broadened by the immersion trip.

*Interactions between Faculty and Students*

Most scholarship focuses on the impact of immersion trips directly on attending students. However, a question was included to explore the relationships between students, and between students and participating faculty. Six of the nine students reported that their “relationships became stronger” and there was a “bonding effect” of the trip, so that most participating became “closer friends,” while three specifically stated there was “no change in

relationships.” Only three students integrated faculty into the responses, but stated that faculty “probably gained a better understanding of needs and wants of each social work major.” Four students in total mentioned the benefit of visiting graduate programs, and three proffered that learning about MSW programs gave “a better understanding of what your goals should be for graduate school,” “made more concrete my career path,” and “helped guide my professional practice interests.” As healthy relationships are essential for both the social work practitioner and in understanding clients of social services, the trip appeared to strengthen the relationships between students, but only minimally between faculty and students.

#### *Length of Time Spent on Trip*

Overall, six students expressed that the amount of time, 3 days and 2 nights, was “sufficient” for positive growth and learning, however they would prefer to have a longer period of time. One was “sure ready to go home by the end of it,” while three others expressed that more time on the trip would affect commitments at home, including both parenting and employment commitments. Two traditional four-year students simply stated they would like a longer trip to increase experiences for learning.

#### **Discussion**

The long-term implications of these immersion trips are left largely unexplored by this study. However, in the short term, it appears the immersion trips had a positive effect on student perceptions of vocational identity, similar to the Mills, Bersamina, and Plante (2007) study. The limited findings of this research support previous literature that providing opportunities for students to experience persons and situations beyond the classroom or their personal communities may in fact broaden their commitments to reflection and action. For those students from small rural communities, an important developmental milestone is in understanding a larger world of social responsibilities and reflecting on one’s place in it. Commitment to the community is a strongly held cultural belief in rural communities; however, deliberate encounters with more diverse communities in the context of professional development may contribute to improved understanding of oneself in the context of the broad relationships that need to be developed as a social work practitioner. It was also found that immersion trips could allow rural social work students to become more goal-focused, including plans for graduate education.

There did not appear to be any real differences between traditional and non-traditional students in the observed outcomes of this study. It may be because they were much closer in age and life experiences. One's family having been on public benefits did not result in any difference, nor did being a transfer student versus traditional student. The one student that was both a parent and veteran responded differently than the others, and a much larger respondent pool may further demonstrate those differences. However, the results may show that either the definitions used for traditional versus non-traditional student used in this study were weak, or that the categories used by researchers are much more blurred and overlap for the modern student, given the economic realities of education costs. Educators may want to address, through discussion and reflection during the immersion trip, the realities of public assistance and connect the stories of students and their families with the lives of the population the group is interacting with.

Social work educators should construct and design immersion trips that focus on both the needs of traditional undergraduate and non-traditional students, with the goal of achieving social work competency outcomes. Instead of dedicating all or the majority of time to volunteer charity-based community service, integration of other activities such as meeting with seasoned social work practitioners or visiting graduate programs is recommended. Faculty at small colleges with limited budgets may have to be creative with assisting in fundraising efforts, and sacrifice personal time that may be spent on other commitments.

Beyond social work, educators from other disciplines, including non-professional disciplines, should consider integration of both professional activities related to various fields as well as visiting graduate schools, both of which appeared to impact the development of students in this study. Service learning immersion trips should include some degree of immersion with a population in need, which allows one to "walk in the shoes" of persons who are receiving the services the students are providing. For smaller colleges and universities during periods of budget constraint and cutbacks, there may be fear in financially supporting week-long excursions away from campus and affording transportation and lodging costs. However, this study demonstrates the benefits of shorter, more intensive immersion trips, which contain overall costs. Reimbursement of a few tanks of gas with carpooling, sharing meals, and finding

a low-cost housing option should be considered, and with collective effort between students, faculty and staff, some can be found within a 200 mile radius, far enough away from campus and region to be a “new” experience. Leveraging funds between groups may also help cover the costs of shorter immersion trips, such as between the student-run club with support from student government organizations, the academic department, and college administrative offices such as student life or campus ministry.

This study’s small sample size of course limits the power of its conclusions. With limited funding and only one faculty member participating, the majority of labor was dedicated to programmatic aspects of initiating these first trips. As the data is self-reported only, the findings should be interpreted with caution. An improved design for future study may include a comparison of outcomes between a group of rural and nontraditional students with a control group of traditional, urban college students. Addition of a reflective component, with written and oral reflections, regarding structural social justice and human rights issues would provide additional opportunity for understanding this social work competency. As this study provides a foundation for further study, we are considering integration of a digital portal for observation, such as a social media page dedicated to the trip, where photos and other digital material and comments may be made. “Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse among peers to use others’ experience and one’s own to assess reasons for justifying one’s assumptions and making action decisions based on the resulting insight” (Gumpert & Kraybill-Greggo, 2005, 9). Therefore, social media would be an appropriate medium to share experiences with relative ease. In addition, faculty may conduct a focus group or interviews after the trip, or construct a tool for observation of student behavior when engaging in the immersion experiences. Thus, three or more sources of data may be triangulated. In addition, an index may be used, such as the Measuring Attitudes toward Poverty Scale (Atherton, Gemmel, Haagenstad, & Holt, 1993) as a structured questionnaire for participants that has established reliability in prior studies, and administered as a pretest and posttest to the trip. Addition of these various tools may also increase the sample size of data available for analysis.

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*About the authors:*

### **Joseph Squillace**

Joe Squillace, Ph.D., MSW, is an Assistant Professor at MacMurray College, Director of the Social Work Program, and Chair of the Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Prior to MacMurray, he taught for 10 years in the MSW and BSW programs at St. Louis University. While there, he received the Excellence in Teaching Award from the MSW Student Association in 2010, and the Excellence in Teaching Award from the BSSW Student Association in 2008. He is the author of numerous scholarly and advocacy publications covering Medicaid, dental and mental health care. As a practicing social worker, he has been a policy analyst, advocate, nonprofit manager, and direct service practitioner. He drafted the Comprehensive Children's Mental Health Services System legislation that passed the Missouri legislature in 2005, as well as legislation to prevent the relinquishing of child custody for mental health services, and for the provision of oral health care services delivered by dental hygienists in public health settings. In addition, the Missouri Association of Social Welfare, St. Louis Chapter, presented him with the 2001 Advocate of the Year award. Ph.D. in Public Policy from St. Louis University; MSW from St. Louis University; BA in Philosophy from Fordham University.