

**Influence of Social Events on Academic Learning of Global Service-Learning Alumni**

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### **Introduction/Need for the Study**

Globalization has driven higher education institutions to internationalize their service-learning to enhance students' learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). The Uganda service-learning program of this study was founded on school gardens as a learning approach that could fulfill students, curricula objectives (Ikendi, 2022; Ikendi et al., 2023a; 2023b; Nonnecke et al., 2015). Students from both Iowa State University (ISU) and Makerere University (MAK) participate every summer working with elementary school students in Kamuli district, Uganda to establish school gardens and also participate in several social events. Students participate in tours and travel to appreciate and learn from the long history of Uganda as the "Pearl of Africa"; they visit National parks, the Equator, and cultural sites which fulfill their tourist adventures, a common aspiration among study abroad students (Jarvis & Peel, 2008; Nawijn et al., 2010). Students also participate in co-curricular activities where they play several indoor games including Bananagrams, scrabble and chess; outdoor games like basketball, soccer, and biking; and music and dance to relax their minds from gardening. Also, students participate in social parties to celebrate their achievements like the singing of Anthems during American independence, cooking and sharing traditional foods, creative performances which involve composing songs relating to their garden activities, and painting team murals for identity. Whereas social events promote socialization (Ikendi et al., 2022a; 2022b; 2023c), this study sought to assess their influence on students' academic learning.

### **Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

School gardening, an experiential form of learning was conceptualized by Dewey, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century U.S. progressivist whose mission was educating the whole child (Dewey, 1918). Dewey termed experiential learning as an educational philosophy called a *theory of experience* (Dewey, 1938). He positioned his argument on the fact that traditional education had little need for theory since the practice was already determined by tradition. The new experiential approach to education, to Dewey, needed a sound theory of experience to guide its conduct. The experiential learning concept has over time been advanced through research by Kolb, which formed the theoretical base of this study. According to Kolb (2015), experiential learning highlights the fundamental role that experience plays in the learning process, "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 49). Experiential learning embraces involvement in specific experiences, reflecting on them, intellectualizing those experiences, and actively participating in experimenting with those experiences. Learners learn from their experience in the hands-on activities resulting in mastery of concepts through assimilation and accommodation processes; learning outcomes represent the historical records gained from the learning activities.

### **Methodology**

This study was part of a larger census that involved 291; 166 (MAK) and 125 (ISU) alumni who completed a summer program named "Creating a school garden: Service-learning in Uganda" between 2006-2019. The IRB at ISU granted this study as "Exempt" under IRB #21-263-01. We reached the alumni through Qualtrics using emails provided by the Program Director. The main survey instrument with 23 questions was designed based on the guideline of Dillman et al. (2014) Tailored Design Method. However, the paper focused on two questions i) alumni's university and ii) the social events question which comprised a five-point Likert scale. The Likert question sought to determine how influential each social event was on alumni academic learning during service-learning. The scale was composed of "1=Not at all Influential" through "5=Extremely Influential." The main instrument was reviewed by a panel of eight professors and

five graduate students based on a “panel of expert guidelines” to establish the content, construct, and face validity. All items were modified as needed and retained. Five communications were involved including an advance notice, an invitation letter with a survey link, and three reminders. We settled with 274 alumni after 17 email delivery failures during the advance notice. We facilitated MAK alumni who were in Uganda with a \$10 internet fee sent to their mobile money accounts. Consent was embedded in the first question where participants who chose to take part, clicked “Yes”. Data collection closed after 30 days on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022, with an overall 258 (94.2%) responses. The Cronbach’s alpha was .792 showing a strong consistency.

### Findings

The Mean ( $M=3.77$ ;  $SD=.940$ ) for 03 social events was established with 205 (81.3%) complete responses for all alumni. By event, the majority; 77 of 227 (33.9%) within tours and travels; and 68 of 226 (30.1%) within social parties reported that their participation was extremely influential to their academic learning. Also, the majority 79 of 240 (32.9%) within co-curricular reported it was very influential to their learning. We determined if there existed any differences between MAK and ISU alumni who reported that their participation in a social event influenced their academic learning. An independent sample *t*-test was performed, and Levene’s Test for Equality of variances showed no violation. The combined complete responses for tours and travels were (MAK=126, ISU=101) and results indicated that MAK alumni reported higher influence on their academic learning ( $M=3.93$ ,  $SD=1.174$ ) than ISU alumni ( $M=3.60$ ,  $SD=1.123$ ),  $t(225)=2.110$ ,  $p=.637$ . Similarly, for social parties (MAK=134, ISU=92), results indicated that MAK alumni reported higher influence on their academic learning ( $M=3.80$ ,  $SD=1.175$ ) than ISU alumni ( $M=3.57$ ,  $SD=1.700$ )  $t(224)=1.469$ ,  $p=.662$ . With co-curricular, (MAK=140, ISU=100) and results indicated that MAK alumni reported higher influence on their academic learning ( $M=3.70$ ,  $SD=1.123$ ) than ISU alumni ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=1.140$ )  $t(238)=.946$ ,  $p=.604$ . However, all these differences were not significant. Overall, the means for MAK alumni were higher for all three social events and were within the scale of 3.0–4.0. The scale of 3.0 in this study represents a “somewhat influential” and 4.0 represents “very influential” with the statement on each event.

### Conclusions

Alumni learned several lessons from the social events. In tours and travels, students appreciated Uganda’s beauty as the “Pearl of ...” because of her flora and fauna; and learn from the adventures to fulfill their tourist adventures. The co-curricular activities like sports and games provided opportunities for relaxation, deeper engagement, and the development of intimate relationships with peers, pupils, instructors, and staff. Also, closer contact among students in the co-curricular lead to a better understanding of peers’ cultural distinctiveness which improves the authenticity of inter-member contact relations and promotes intercultural development (Ikendi et al., 2022a; 2022b; 2023c). Social parties like celebrating independence which involves students singing the U.S. Star-Spangled Banner; cooking and sharing traditional foods increase their knowledge of cultural foods; and also painting murals promote social identity and belonging.

### Implications

Social events depict students’ social life through adventures and leisure during service-learning. These activities control fatigue after routine fieldwork, provide opportunities for students to learn about peers’ unique talents and cultural distinctiveness beyond field activities, and learn about and from nature and the environment through tours. These activities similarly promote self-discovery in academic research and talent development through working in closer contact with peers, instructors, and communities in these several social event activities in service-learning.

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