

A Call for Global Engagement Beyond Academic Tourism

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As a visiting U.S. scholar with the University of El Salvador (UES), I had the exciting opportunity to work closely with faculty and students at the only biology department in the entire country of El Salvador. While my research project was to evaluate the landscape ecology of *Pseudomyrmex* ants that thrive symbiotically in the hollow thorns of *Vachellia* trees common to the tropical dry forest of Mesoamerica, my first day at the UES presented me with a different and radically important question. When the department chair showed me to my office space, my cubicle neighbor and resident Phycologist introduced herself and promptly asked if I was an “academic tourist.” I knew exactly where she was coming from.

The following unpublished essay is a collaborate exploration between a Fulbright Scholar from El Salvador traveling to the U.S. and a Fulbright Scholar from the U.S. traveling to El Salvador.

The antipodes of academic tourism

The term “academic tourism” was first introduced by professor Abaza in 2011 (American University in Cairo) as a characterization of the scholarly productive but socially disenfranchised international academic community during the Arab Spring, but was later defined by Rodriguez *et al.* in a 2012 article entitled “Academic tourism demand in Galicia, Spain” in the journal of *Tourism Management* as a distinct form of tourism by which mobilized higher education groups impact local economies. While seemly disconnected, Abaza and Rodriguez were both responding to different syntax elements of the term “academic tourism”: Abaza critiques the impact of fleeting academics and Rodriguez touts the impact of target-market tourism. As such, it is necessary to consider scale in the

nascent etymology of academic tourism: internal (the host's perspective) and external (the visitor's perspective).

Both internal and external perspectives have similar expectations of the "tourism" element in academic tourism: to contribute monetarily to the local economies that higher education groups visit (both national and international). However, while target-market tourism (e.g. academic, ecological, medical, etc.) has been traditionally favored by countries with popular travel destinations, there is growing evidence that the positive impacts are at best *limited* to localized communities due to its narrow scope and sustainability. Important differences arise in the internal and external expectations as to the role of the "academic" element in academic tourism, which ultimately contribute to an inequitable relationship. The perspective of visiting international scholars is academically unidirectional and akin to an agreement for the exchange of services, appropriately characterized as "colonial" engagement by Ogden in a 2008 article entitled "The View from the Veranda: Understanding Today's Colonial Student" in *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. The perspective of the academic host is that of a critical opportunity to calibrate academic and intellectual endeavours, specifically in terms of research (literature, analyses, etc.) and teaching (pedagogy, academic technology, etc.). Historically, colonial engagement has been very productive for international scholars, as visiting academics (who may not even speak the host's language) get to publish inside data in exclusive journals that ultimately host institutions are unlikely able to access or afford and therefore rarely contribute to the local knowledge-base.

In deference to the community partnerships championed in the field of service-learning, it is clear that academic tourism as a collaborative model has done a poor job of cultivating solidarity as well as fostering equitable and transformative experiences among international scholars and the host communities where they harvest their research.

The evolution of social justice

Merit for the compartmentalization of service in academia is no longer an adaptive mission strategy, global engagement at Jesuit Institutions must seek to integrate teacher-scholarship and social justice. Per the World Bank, the characteristics of a developing nation describe conditions in 76 percent of the world's countries and how 85 percent of the world's population lives. Experience in the developing world is simply paramount for cultivating effective global citizens. Specifically, U.S. Jesuit Institutions need to foster international opportunities that challenge students to link degrees with social justice elements that calibrate them to the historical reality the majority of the world experiences.

Take for example the Central American nation of El Salvador, where there are 33 universities but only one single biology program in a country that is approximately the size of the state of New Jersey. The same is also true for the remainder of the fundamental sciences in El Salvador (chemistry, physics, etc.), which are only offered at the public University of El Salvador (UES). Between 2000-12, the UES biology department (n=36, composed of 0 percent Ph.D.; 37 percent M.S./ M.A.T.; and 64 percent Licentiate degrees) on average graduated 6 students per year (out of 300 undergraduates in the major) that spent 7-8 years completing degree requirements. The U.S. teacher-scholar model is absent in Salvadoran Higher Education, so a lack of advanced degrees among faculty also means that biology undergraduates emerge with deficient research experience that makes it impossible to compete for graduate programs abroad (specifically in the U.S. and Europe). In contrast, as a recent review panelist for the Graduate Research Fellowship Program at the National Science Foundation I observed that as many as 40 percent of undergraduate applicants had co-authored at least one peer-reviewed publication. Given the dismal graduation rates, uncompetitiveness for graduate synergies, and that 66 percent of UES biology professors currently holding advanced degrees (M.S./M.A.T.) are likely to retire over the next 5 years, the discipline of biology in El Salvador is effectively an *endangered species*.

The challenge for scholars from developing countries is access to academic development opportunities abroad, specifically to advanced degrees and teacher-scholar models. As a point of clarification, funding is not the principle issue. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development is committing \$22 million between 2014-19 to reinvigorate Higher Education in El Salvador. However, the resulting dilemma is as follows: how can developing countries grow transformative academic experiences when the local Higher Education system that cultivates them is itself deficient? The answer is international collaboration that seeds teacher-scholarship and research mentoring in solidarity with the advancement of budding scholars and the fostering of open-access knowledge-bases. While some reading this section may be wary of brain-drain (wherein talented scholars are recruited abroad and do not return to their native countries), I put forward that seeking stability is hardly a character flaw isolated to academics and that it is instead the intended challenge for which educated politicians are elected. The globalization of Higher Education has helped developing countries look to academia to cultivate leadership at home and has tasked universities with reimagining teaching and research in the service of social justice advancements. Nevertheless, globalization is not social justice, since its purpose is not to level the playing field but to make keen users aware that it is not.

The challenge for U.S. scholars and administrators traveling to developing countries is functionally overcoming the fear of insecurity (both real and perceived). Perhaps heightened security concerns are a reflection of the times, but this is the only world available for global engagement and social justice certainly exists beyond the exploits of expatriate communities overseas. Sensus the Wall Street Journal, Latin America is the most violent region in the world outside a war zone, followed by Africa. However, Latin America is also inescapably the largest region in the western hemisphere, Africa is both the cradle humanity and its center of diversity, and the two regions combined represent the highest diversity and density of the next emerging markets/ economies in the world. The benefits of

cultivating mutually transformative experiences in an international environment born of equitable academic solidarity far outweigh the costs of co-coordinating with a counterpart at an overseas university, ground-truthing with the Cultural Affairs Office at the respective U.S. Embassy, and having your university risk manager stock extra paper. As such, the successful integration of teacher-scholarship and social justice will likely continue to evolve from grassroots initiatives, where faculty-led international projects are nurtured administratively rather than the other way around.

A 21st century approach

While the environmental bellwether in the late 20th century was biodiversity loss and sustainable development, the global challenge for this century is climate change adaptation. According to the World Bank, the poorest nations on the planet are the least prepared to mitigate or adapt to climate change and both Latin America and the Caribbean are predicted to be one of the most severely affected regions. The message to environmental scholars in Pope Francis' Encyclical "*Laudato Si'*" is clear: the transformative contributions from students, faculty, and researchers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields must serve to inform both local and international cultures as well as connect learning communities in developed and developing nations. In short, academic tourism is counterproductive as a mode of global engagement despite the appeal of its revenue neutrality. The unvarnished success of revolutionizing Jesuit global engagement in STEM fields will primarily depend on the merit that is awarded for integrating the teacher-scholarship of ecological systems with the environmental justice challenges of human systems where international experiences like research, teaching, and service are cultivated.

Academics from developed and developing countries have a lot to learn from each other, and grassroot project initiatives always build on the solidarity of mutually beneficial ideas that address evolving scientific and social challenges while at the same time realistically mitigating costs and risk. For

example, universities in the developing countries offer tremendous experience with cost-effective global engagement. Many of our Latin American colleagues have been using inexpensive webcams since the dial-up internet days of the 1990s to electronically-invite international scholars into classroom dynamics and research initiatives well before the U.S. advent in the 2000s of sophisticated technology enhanced learning spaces that bank on high-speed internet services often on dedicated lines. At the same time, universities from developed countries offer tremendous insights into engaged learning and research mentoring. In El Salvador for example, many teaching techniques that are in practice today (e.g. lecture-heavy courses) have changed little since their introduction by Peace Corps volunteers between 1962-80. As such, inquiry-based learning such as student presentations are not part of the undergraduate or graduate experience (e.g. only learned academics traditionally present).

It's important to point out that global collaborative networks should not operate with tit-for-tat strategies, even though such international engagement models are commonplace in the popular media (e.g. strategies for reducing global carbon emissions). In both human and ecological systems, the success of mutually beneficial interactions is in the balanced exchange of differential services (e.g. nectar reward in return for pollen-transfer services, or environmental justice explorations in connection to research mentoring programs, etc.) as long as the growth and survival of the interacting parties exceeds that of going-it-alone. For example, my students that have presented research posters at different symposia in El Salvador (e.g. the National Conference on Climate Change, and the Conference on Engineering and Architecture at the "Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas") are surprised with the differences in the local presentation style and that Salvadoran academics (students, faculty and administrators) gravitate to them with questions about the dynamics of U.S. undergraduate research, which radically restructures their formative experiences in comparison to presenting at U.S. symposia alone. In a similar manner, Salvadoran academics visiting U.S. universities are amazed students can conduct research from day one, switch easily between faculty labs, and defend research

ideas in diverse presentations formats well in advance of starting a given thesis project, which radically improves formative experiences in comparison to the Salvadoran model of only conducting research during the thesis year (which is year 5+).

Transformative higher education is a long-term commitment to a culture of change, which actively explores opportunities to strengthen future generations for adaptively meeting ever-evolving local and global challenges. Given the organization of Jesuit universities across the world, establishing a pilot institute (in the form of an international consortium) committed to fostering equitable global engagement, which would be based at a university in a developing country, would go a long way to facilitate and encourage transformative academic exchanges (e.g. sabbaticals) from universities in developed countries. Such an institute would serve to create a hotspot for diverse ideas, courses, projects, and democratize collaborative explorations of the challenge outlined in Pope Francis' Encyclical "*Laudato Si'*": linking the teacher-scholarship of ecological systems with the social justice challenges of human systems. Simply stated, the global network of Jesuit universities has the opportunity to transform academic tourism from a historical reality into an oxymoron.

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