

## Best Practices for Immersions (7/22/11)

### **Core Principles:**

All of these principles are interdependent and, therefore, should all be present for an immersion program to be successful.

1. Do no harm:
  - Good intentions are not enough
  - When entering a community in need, people can be very vulnerable and it is very easy to do damage even if you intend to do good
2. Before selecting a project, listen:
  - Respond to an expressed community need
3. Do your homework:
  - Be knowledgeable about, attentive to and respectful of host community's history and traditions
4. Recognize that you are an outsider and a guest in the host community:
  - Respect the integrity and wisdom of the local community for they know their history, culture, etc.
5. Recognize that you won't be there for the long-term:
  - Partner with a known and respected local organization whose core values are consistent with Jesuit educational goals
6. Stay focused on your goal:
  - Students' education throughout the immersion program comes first
  - Throughout the experience, pay attention to each individual participant's behavior and needs
7. Pay attention to program structure:
  - Recognize that every detail about the program has an impact on student learning
8. Know your values:
  - Be intentional about building them into all aspects of the program

### **Essential Program Components:**

1. Selection process
2. Clear communication of program goals, expectations, and consequences
3. Teambuilding
4. Sound program structure and detailed logistics
5. Education/Preparation
6. Structured reflection
7. Re-entry activities
8. Evaluation

### **Steps of Program Development:**

1. Prepare yourself
  - Why do you want to run this immersion program?

- Evaluate your reasons for wanting to do this/go to this community; Do they fit with the Jesuit educational mission?
- What values will guide the structure and administration of your immersion program?
- Have you honestly assessed your personal and professional strengths and limitations that relate to this program?
- What knowledge and/or experiences can you contribute to the program?
- Why is this program good for Loyola students and why are you the best person to run it?
- Have you thoroughly studied the community/country (culture, history, issues, etc.)?
- Have you consulted with other people who have experience with immersions, and the community you are visiting or the issue you are exploring?
- Are you familiar with the tenets of experiential education pedagogy?
- If a natural disaster occurred and you are interested in responding to it through a service immersion program, have you carefully assessed the current state of the area, the specific and professional needs that exist, and your program's ability to respond to the existing reality?

2. Identify your community partner(s)

- What services have been or are already being provided? How does your intended program fit with the services already in place?
- What non-profit organizations already work in the area? Are they well-known? Do you or anyone you know have experience/connections with them?
  - What community agencies/organizations might be potential partners for your program?
- Have you met with and/or talked with your potential partners to evaluate their work and how your program would fit with them?
- Criteria for choosing a partner:
  - Partner's core values must be consistent with Jesuit educational mission
  - Ensure that partner works **with** the people in the community, not **for** them

3. Partner must be committed to the broader education of your program participants, including providing background information, speakers on relevant justice issues, participating in reflections as requested, etc.

- Partner should serve a population that is marginalized, most commonly through material poverty
- Partner must have a formal organizational structure, which may include a board of directors, reliable funding source(s), professional staff, and volunteer insurance
- Partner must have a proven track record in working in the community and should demonstrate stability and continuity for the future
- Partner should have a plan which considers health and safety of program participants

4. Consider needs of your potential student participants

- What expressed student needs and/or interests does the program address?
- What program goals and learning outcomes have you identified for your participants?
  - Are these goals and desired learning outcomes consistent with Jesuit educational mission?
  - Are these goals and desired learning outcomes consistent with the community's needs? Are there other programs at Loyola that are already serving the same population and/or focusing on the same issue(s)?

- If yes, then is there a need for another program to be started (i.e., are there more students interested in the topic than the currently existing program(s) can accept)?
  - Do your intended program dates accommodate Loyola students' schedules?
  - Have you considered the financial cost of the program and how feasible it would be for students?
- 5. Develop a solid program structure
  - Construct the program
    - \*Remember: A solid program structure and schedule helps ensure an effective and educational experience for the participants***
  - Based on all of the preparation and research steps above, finalize the type of immersion opportunity that best meets your program goals and the community needs (i.e. solidarity, service, or cultural/language immersion)
  - Decide on most appropriate duration/length of program
  - Determine housing accommodations, meal sites, service activities, etc.
  - Determine realistic transportation needs and how to best meet them
  - Decide most appropriate leadership structure for group:
    - How many F/A/S vs. student leaders are needed?
    - Who will be your on-site coordinator?
    - Who would provide translations if needed?
  - Consider safety and liability issues in all steps above
    - Consult with Loyola's Director of Campus Services and Dean of International Programs (if appropriate) regarding safety and risk procedures
    - Become familiar with institutional policies regarding safety
- 6. Carefully think through the participant selection process
  - \*Remember: A diverse and committed group of participants is key to a successful immersion program***
  - Clearly articulate program goals and criteria on application and in advertisements
  - Create a written application with essays (motivations, expectations, past experiences, response to mission statement/program goals) and, when needed, recommendations in order to select the most appropriate participants for the program
  - Interview all potential candidates (after "first cut" if necessary) by a team of leaders (multiple sources of input)
    - Make final decisions with leadership team after review of all materials and input
- 7. Clearly and repeatedly communicate program goals, behavioral expectations and consequences through:
  - Promotional materials

- Letter of acceptance-restating program goals, giving contact person
- Behavioral Agreement
- Participant Agreement
- Interview (if used)
- First group meeting

***\*Remember: It is important to communicate program goals as well as expectations for participant behavior because expectations:***

- Help prepare participants for emergencies and unique situation
- Decrease the likelihood of inappropriate behavior
- Inform participants about liability issues, health concerns and insurance needs

8. Prepare participants over the weeks/months prior to the immersion through meetings that frame the experience in a larger context

- Teambuilding activities
  - Lay a solid foundation for intellectual learning and emotional growth
  - Build trust and a safe environment, while fostering communication
  - Icebreakers: Start with introductions and basic personal information
  - Group building dynamics: Move towards deeper content that diminishes
  - inhibition, creates group cohesion and challenges the group to problem-solve
- Logistics
- Culture/History, etc (of host community)
- Personal attitudes/expectations/perspectives
- Explanation of service activities (i.e. what kind of service you will be doing) and training (if necessary)
- Education about relevant social justice issues
- How the experience links to a Jesuit education
- How the experience relates to the students' own personal development (intellectual, spiritual, emotional)
- Resource list (i.e. icebreakers, group building dynamics, educational articles, videos, websites, etc.)

9. Incorporate regular structured reflection prior, during and after the immersion experience

***\* Remember: Regular reflection allows the participants to intellectually and emotionally synthesize the experiential and the educational components. Additionally, it encourages participants to engage in personal development and exploration.***

- Facilitate reflection about experiences such as service, community interaction, speakers, etc.

- Issues raised during reflection should be framed within the larger context of social justice issues
- Participants should be encouraged to explore possible connections between their immersion experience and their spiritual/faith development
- Reflection can occur through group meetings, individual journaling, art activities, etc.

10. Plan re-entry activities that will assist participants to integrate the immersion experience into their life at home and to apply lessons learned

- Schedule one or more re-entry meetings, create an online community for participants to continue to share resources and reflect on the experience, send updates to participants about relevant issues affecting the host community they visited, etc.
- Address intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs that arise during the transition to home
- Continue ongoing analysis and reflection on the experience
- Provide structure and examples to integrate lessons into daily life
- Provide tools for coping with transition back home
  - Provide opportunities to practice articulating what they learned from the experience and how it affected them
  - Give examples of activities that participants can do at home to continue learning about the issues faced by their host community (i.e. service opportunities, news sources, clubs and organizations, advocacy groups, etc.)
  - Encourage the continuation of the relationships formed between group members and with the host community (if possible)

***\* Remember: Without adequate follow-up, it is possible for participants not to learn from the experience.***

***Additionally, the transition home can be difficult for students without appropriate support and resources to apply the lessons from the experience at home.***

11. Evaluation

- Conduct verbal and written evaluation with the Leadership Team to assess the effectiveness of the program components
- Administer a written evaluation to participants to assess their learning based on stated program learning outcomes and to evaluate the program
- Discuss participants' learning and evaluation of the program during a group reflection
- Incorporate appropriate participant suggestions into the following year's planning

12. Create a program timeline including the following considerations

- Planning, preparation and research should start at least one year in advance of the program implementation:
  - Choose your site and community partner(s)
  - Choose your leadership structure and identify program leader(s)
  - Determine program cost and fundraising process that will be implemented
  - Research safety issues
- At least one full academic semester is suggested for all selection and preparation components
- Other time considerations may be site specific (i.e. passport, visas, immunizations, etc.)
- We recommend scheduling at least one follow-up meeting to process the experience after returning to Loyola; this meeting should preferably happen within two weeks of the program finishing
- Participant evaluations should also happen preferably within two weeks of the program finishing, and can be done in any of the following formats:
  - On site, at the end of the program
  - Online
  - At the follow-up meeting
- Program leader(s) should evaluate program success and assess student learning, and make recommendations for future continuation preferably within two months of the program finishing