Displacing activism? The impact of international service trips on understandings of social change

Michael J. Cermak, Jonathan A. Christiansen, Amy C. Finnegan, Aideen P. Gleeson and Shelley K. White
Boston College, USA

Darcy K. Leach
Bradley University, USA

Abstract
This article reports key findings from in-depth interviews with undergraduate students returning from international service trips (ISTs). These interviews examined students’ perceptions of social change activities and assessed students’ affinity toward service and activism independently as well as the perceived relationship and interaction between the two. Using an identity project model, we argue that far from being complementary, service and activism may act as competing identities with service being preferred. We further argue that ISTs can incorporate and model a broader range of civic engagement activities to help students better understand the different approaches taken to enacting social change. In particular, we call for the deliberate incorporation of strategic activist skill-building, and discussions of the history and ideology of activism within ISTs.

Keywords
activism, identity, immersion, international service trips, service, undergraduate students

Introduction
Service and activism are both proposed as antidotes to the wane of civic engagement on college campuses, but they are typically either researched in isolation or conflated. While scholars within the service-learning literature actively debate whether service-learning programs (SLPs) promote orientations to charity or social justice, few have considered how the paradigm of service itself
may be complementary or antagonistic to other paradigms of social change (Morton, 1995; Wade, 2000; Cuban et al., 2007). We begin by pointing out that the debate over the outcomes of SLPs mirrors some discussions of service in relation to activism, where service is associated with more of a charitable orientation (Wade, 2000), while activism is considered a stronger vehicle for social justice (Watts et al., 2003; Cuban et al., 2007). Although activism is not a stated goal of many SLPs, we see a call to move toward more social justice models embedded in the critiques of such programs. For example, Wade (2000) states the desire to move ‘beyond charity’ for service learning practitioners. A recent quantitative study of SLP outcomes by Wang and Jackson (2005) shows that at the individual level many students develop a more charitable orientation as opposed to social justice orientations (Wang et al., 2005). If a charitable disposition is the typical outcome of SLPs, we ask: how does the paradigm of charity, when promoted by SLPs, interact with other forms of social change on college campuses? Is the dominance of charity over social justice within SLPs parallel to a dominance of service over activism? Can service displace activism at the institutional level and what are the repercussions?1

We focused our attention on international service learning (ISL) as an emergent and intensive SLP with strong claims to developing social justice orientations in its participants but with little substantiation or measurement of students’ understandings of the impact (Grusky, 2000; Crabtree, 2008). In our study of undergraduates returning from international service trips (ISTs), we employed a qualitative approach, allowing students to discuss in detail their thoughts and inclinations towards service and activism. Through this, we were able to understand how students make meaning of service and activism within both personal and social contexts. We ultimately found that service is displacing activism as students form identities and orientations to social change. This begins with an expressed sense of dissonance over how to respond to the acute poverty and injustices they witnessed. That is, consistent with Kiely (2004), students return with a strong desire to act on what they have seen and learned, but lack a framework for expressing the transformation they underwent. Students then channel their energies into awareness-raising, though generally without plans for strategic social change. Similar to Wang and Jackson (2005), we found that students identify their activities as service-oriented and value these as charitable acts, preferred over activities associated with activism. We found that service and activism emerged as what social psychological models term an ‘identity project’; with students choosing between a finite range of service-oriented or activist-oriented identities (Harre, 2007). Our application of this identity model to our findings allows us to present how service displaces activism, with SLPs contributing to this displacement. In the literature review that follows, we first discuss ISTs as a form of service learning, provide a brief history of what we mean by service and activism, and follow this with a discussion of the identity project model we used to interpret our results.

**International service trips as a form of service learning**

In recent years, there has been an influx of undergraduate students traveling abroad on organized international service and cultural immersion trips to the Global South (Grusky, 2000; Parker et al., 2007; Crabtree, 2008). As Monard-Weissman (2003) describes, ISTs are a form of educational enrichment designed to expose students to new cultures and to the conditions of poverty, disease and political conflict in many countries around the world, to teach students about the causes and potential solutions to these problems, and to inspire them to become engaged in the world as caring, responsible citizens. ISTs are one example of ISL, a field that includes ISTs as well as study abroad programs with service components, and international programs with formal service-learning curricula (Kraft, 2002; Crabtree, 2008). Most ISL programs broadly seek to
reach two objectives: student learning and community service (Crabtree, 2008). ISTs typically last 1–2 weeks in length, take place during school breaks (that is, spring break) and entail a service component; many also include an immersion experience (for example, staying with a family). While they vary in formality of academic instruction, many ISTs often include educational activities such as lectures, reading relevant literature, viewing pertinent films and engaging in on-site reflections and/or journaling.

Though research on ISTs is relatively new, the outcomes of ISTs on the students that participate in them are typically measured in one of two ways. The first approach measures the outcomes in relation to vocational training (for example, within nursing and social work) through pre- and post-trip measures (Boyle et al., 1999; Larson et al., 2006; Bentley et al., 2007). The second approach situates the outcomes of the service trips in the context of changes in critical consciousness and worldview (Kiely, 2004). Based on analysis of interviews, reflection papers and journals, authors make conclusions about the effect of the trips on students’ ideologies and engagement in individual and social action (Monard-Weissman, 2003; Kiely, 2004).

Like service and service learning, IST practitioners engage in debate over the mission and outcome of their activities. Longstanding critiques of ISTs cite minimal material impact on the entrenched problems experienced by host communities, a lack of attention to the differential power relationship between IST participants and host community members, a dangerous reinforcement of internal divisions within host communities, the cooptation of service-learning projects in the community by special interests, the unexamined promotion of service over broader transformation as a solution to social problems and the inability to hold IST participants accountable to the issues raised and experienced on the trip (Illich, 1968; Crabtree, 1998, 2008).

We contribute to the emerging IST literature by not solely examining the outcomes of these trips in terms of students’ civic identities, but by extending this discussion to service and activism as related but separate forms of civic involvement. We observed that, especially on the campus being researched, there seemed to be a dearth of student activism, in the traditional sense but also in how students would label their work, despite the high number of social justice oriented ISTs. Emerging from such programs, we consider how students then construct their own conceptions and evaluations of service and activism as ethos of social change.

**Relationship between service and activism**

Like other scholars (Marullo et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2005), we view contemporary service as centered on community and education with a tendency towards a model of charity. In contrast, activism is associated with strategic and collective action that aims to address underlying causes of social problems (Larson et al., 2005; Kirshner, 2007), the very traits that critics say are lacking in service and service learning (Wade, 2000; Bickford et al., 2002). Although both service and activism are related to civic engagement and individual agency, they both have meanings that interact at individual and social levels. That is, while many studies focus on individual outcomes alone we began by recognizing the social salience of the service and activist constructs and our eventual interviews directly targeted each of these and how they related. At the university being researched, while activism is less institutionalized, the service paradigm has achieved a high level of visibility by working with existing institutions and emphasizing learning and education. We view service and activism not as a polarity but as two leading constructs that comprise civic engagement; more thorough investigation is necessary to probe how they interact. In what follows, we briefly consider the literature on service and activism as distinct models of engagement, weighing their strengths and weaknesses, and then set the precedent for our model of how service can displace activism.
Service within higher education falls into the general categories of community service: service without any programmatic learning component; and service learning, which connects service to curricular learning. These two forms of civic engagement have become increasingly prominent on college campuses in recent years and are presented as solutions to the argument that civic engagement is generally declining (Marullo et al., 2000). There has been much research on service in higher education in relation to its benefits to the student population. Studies have shown the benefits of service with regard to students’ identity formation including an increased sense of personal efficacy, self-esteem, confidence in social skills and the ability to build positive relationships with other students and adults (Conrad et al., 1982, 1991; Eyler et al., 1998; Youniess et al., 1999; Yates et al., 2006). Other studies have shown that students’ involvement in service enhances their sense of civic responsibility and inclination to remain involved in civic activities (Alt et al. 1994; Rutter et al. 1989; Youniss et al., 1997, 1999; Astin et al., 1998; Jones et al., 2004; Yates et al., 2006; Seider, 2007). As we have discussed, the primary drawback of service lies in the unresolved debate over whether it lives up to the rhetoric of social justice often espoused by its practitioners. Critics argue that service serves as a form of charity, reproducing power dynamics and structural inequalities (Marullo et al., 2000; King, 2004). This discussion of charity versus social justice is of continual relevance as service becomes an institutionalized and sometimes mandatory part of higher education (Cuban et al., 2007).

In comparison, we associate the term activism with strategic actions for social justice. Activism aims to transform existing systems and rework structures of power (Watts et al., 2003). Its key traits include building and executing strategic skills and a collective approach to problem-solving (Larson et al., 2005; Kirshner, 2007). Like service, it has a strong presence and rich history on college campuses, though it tends to be less institutionalized (McAdam, 1988; Altbach et al., 1990; Boren, 2001). Watts et al. (2003: 186) describe an activist as ‘a person who acts strategically with others, on the basis of shared values, to create a more just society’, and list ‘political participation, pressure tactics aimed at gaining concessions, armed struggle, or operating an organization with a mission of social change or liberation’ as activities commonly associated with activism. Despite the proposed benefits of activism, in the article ‘Giving up activism’, Chatterton (2006) suggests that the stance activists take can be so strong that it alienates others who may be interested in getting involved.

Although many place activism and service on a single spectrum, a happy coupling between service and activist ideology in practice is tenuous at best. Our initial observation was that activism is generally stigmatized on the researched campus, which stands in contrast to the highly visible culture of service and the competitive application process for ISTs. Both have important elements to lend toward civic engagement and agency but it seemed the social values of the constructs themselves outweighed and overshadowed an understanding of the relative contribution of each. This echoed Bickford and Reynolds’ (2002: 230) question: ‘does activism have such negative, radical connotations in our culture that young people want to distance themselves from it, even as students are increasingly committed to service?’ The question poses a challenge to service learning practitioners seeking to incorporate more activist themes in their programs and calls for a greater understanding of the relationship between service and activism.

Service and activism are considered at once ideologies, paradigms and skill sets that influence the overall experience of civic involvement on college campuses, yet they have not been researched in concert. Traditional research of service learning uses broad indexes to measure civic engagement with little attention to how service and activism may interact (Myers-Lipton, 1998; Boyle et al., 1999; Eyler et al., 1999; Astin et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2005). Here we seek to better understand how to untangle service and activism by assessing students’ affinity to them independently as well as the relationship and interaction between the two ethos in personal and social contexts.
Identity projects: bridging the personal and the collective context

In our study we took an inductive approach to understanding how students define, interpret and commit to various modes of civic involvement. Our model for understanding students’ orientation to service and activism takes into account the social psychological forces that shape how students identify their civic engagement activities. Thus, service and activism are treated not only as paradigms with predefined sets of assumptions, but as orientations around which students form their identities through a dynamic process called ‘identity projects’.

Identity projects can be defined as ‘schemas we hold for how to project ourselves into the world that cohere around a psychologically salient theme’ (Harre, 2007: 712) in both collective and personal contexts. Identity projects are constantly evolving as individuals acquire, tend to, change and sometimes abandon various personal identities (Kegan, 1982; Klein, 2000;). Harre (2007) notes that an expressed affiliation with service or activism is representative of an ongoing identity project. To give an example, when a person affiliates as ‘activist-oriented’ or ‘service-oriented’ he/she is conducting an evaluation of his/her own behaviors, a self-reflection that is part of developing a renewed commitment to continued civic engagement. These decisions, while psychological, are also shaped by external social forces and institutional structures (Soloman, 1983; Castells, 2004).

The identity project model of service and activism is applicable to the period after a major event where new information and experience may be used to assess continued commitment to a certain identity. In our case, the IST provides a clear case of a major event designed at transforming participants’ understandings of social change. While inherently psychologically influential, the IST also represents a structured social learning experience that implicitly or explicitly imparts messages about the realm of possibility for social change, and thus provides a social context within which participants construct their own identities within civic engagement. While Harre’s (2007) study was one of the few to consider both service and activism, she conflated the two without considering the possibility that identity projects related to service and activism might actually be in competition. This was in direct contrast to our observations that students freely identified the differences between service and activism and defined their roles as political agents with and against these constructs. Our study attempts to build on this literature by examining service and activism as distinct identities that are shaped by both psychological and social forces.

Research design and method

This study uses 24 in-depth interviews with college students returning from seven different ISTs designed to explore the impact of ISTs on students’ thoughts about service, activism and social change. The location of our study is a Jesuit university located in the northeastern USA. The campus has a vibrant service culture, including intensive year-long service learning programs, secular and religious service clubs, and numerous service trips, both domestic and international. The university has received honors for its service commitments and engages approximately two-thirds of its student population in service annually.

Selection criteria

Seven ISTs were selected from which to solicit participants based on an in-depth matrix created to assess the existing landscape of ISTs at the institution of study. ISTs were categorized by geographic destination, trip philosophy and purpose, trip length and schedule, pre- and post-trip programming, and on-ground programming (including immersion, education and service
components). The final selection of ISTs was chosen to maximize variance on the above variables and to represent the overall variability of student IST experiences at this institution.

In the Fall of 2007, all students who participated in one of the selected ISTs within the past year were invited to complete a brief online survey to gather demographic data and garner participation in in-depth qualitative interviews. Of 82 students who participated in selected ISTs, 43 (52%) completed the online survey, and ultimately 24 (29%) participated in interviews. Our final sample was 75% female and 25% male, and by race, 46% White, 25% Black, 8% Asian, 8% Hispanic and 8% other. Sixty-three percent were Catholic, 21% Protestant and 16% designated another or no religion. By class year, the sample was 21% sophomores, 37% juniors, 16% seniors and 25% students who had graduated.

As an additional step, we followed the model of public sociology presented by Buroway (2005) and discussed our preliminary study results with members of the undergraduate community. Seeking to validate our findings and further explore our study questions, we advertised a focus group to all study participants as well as to campus service and activist groups and networks. Five students participated in this focus group.

Data collection and analysis

Our primary method for data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 1 to 1.5 hours (Seidman, 1991). The interview tool included questions about students’ experiences in preparing for, experiencing and returning from their IST; opinions about important social problems and potential solutions; engagements in social change activities; definitions of service and activism, understandings of the relationship between service and activism, and personal evaluations of and inclinations toward service and/or activism upon returning from their trip.

Interviewers completed training to ensure inter-rater reliability, including participation in a fishbowl analysis of interview techniques. We also took appropriate steps to ensure inter-rater reliability during data analysis. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were then inductively coded and analyzed using Nvivo 8 software to identify emerging themes.

Findings

In what follows we will present four general findings: (1) that students return from ISTs with a sense of dissonance between their newfound desire to make social change and their lack of understanding of how to take action; (2) that the primary means for social change was described as raising awareness; (3) that participants valued service-oriented activities over those associated with activism; and (4) that students’ choice of identifying as service-oriented was in part structured by negative descriptions of activism, as well as a lack of experience and opportunity with activism.

Returning with dissonance

As students discussed their IST experiences and subsequent commitments to social change, we found that, while deeply moved, students consistently experienced dissonance. The majority of participants reported that their IST experience had a profound impact on them, though they often expressed difficulty in articulating the precise effect. Pam’s remark exemplifies such responses: ‘it’s really hard to put it into words, but it’s such an amazing experience’. When asked, all of the 24 students we spoke with said they would recommend an IST to others. However, alongside their praise for ISTs, many students reported feeling unsure and under-equipped to direct their new
perspectives and broader understanding towards efforts for social change. When probed about the impact of her IST and what comes next, Megan elaborated:

I have no idea how you follow up. I mean if you make yourself more aware of a big international problem, following up is a bit of a research effort, I think, to figure out how to follow up and figure out who is involved that’s within access or reach of you.

Evelyn expressed a similar uncertainty about what actions were necessary to address the social problems she described in her interview:

There would have to be like a really big change in like, the system and the way things work ... I don’t even know where to begin with that, like it would have to start with like a change in mindset from like, everybody, including those in power, and I don’t, I have no idea how you would go about doing that, but it’s just like, it’s a really big thing ... I don’t really understand like, how any of that works really ... everything would have to change. I don’t even know where to begin with that, like it’s, it’s a big thing.

The sense of dissonance – an expression of the profound personal meaning of the trips coupled with a lack of preparation to act upon lessons learned – has consequences in the ways students engage the world upon their return from ISTs. Although it is precisely the goal of many ISTs to immerse participants in new social realities in such a way that they emerge with a sense of discom-fort with the status quo, we found that this disquiet was not later reconciled for the participants and instead lead to paralysis or a narrow understanding of civic engagement. Many return disarmed and unable to engage in strategic social change. As a result, most focused on raising awareness as their primary form of engagement following their IST.

**Awareness as action**

While virtually all of our interviewees reported that their experience deeply affected their lives, we found that the extent of their commitment to social change came in the form of personal awareness and a commitment to awareness-raising. Of 24 students, 17 (71%) described how they had either become more aware themselves or were newly invested in building awareness among others. When it came to translating their views into strategic action, students were limited to awareness-raising as their primary, often only, mechanism for social change. In this section we summarize the numerous references to awareness and discuss the types of actions students participated in after ISTs.

The personal awareness students discussed took several forms and many spoke of how the trips had broadened their own thinking about both social problems and the solutions to them. Serena remarked, ‘the trip itself opened my eyes to different issues and situations in different countries … [I’m] coming back with a real awareness of what’s going on in that country and a desire to learn more about that country and other countries and issues here.’ Some spoke of their increased understanding of the extent of global inequality and their own relative privilege. To this, Angela commented, ‘I like to be aware of what’s going on. I’m very aware of the fact that … most people aren’t as privileged as I am.’ For some, like Kimberley, this increased awareness of her own privilege led to a more critical perspective, questioning how such inequality arises:

They’ve definitely given me a way better perspective on global issues … you grow up in one country you only know what’s going on in that one country. You don’t really take into perspective how other people are living, or how your economy affects other people. And then like you go to another country and you see the middle class is living worse than your poor class and it’s like, what’s going on there?
Awareness was also expressed in reference to how ISTs planted a desire within the students not only to understand more about these problems, but to spread that awareness to others. As Serena put it:

now I love to, well I don’t love to read about social problems, but I really do want to know about the things that are going on and I really do want to talk about them and I really do want to tell somebody about them.

We found, however, that most students spread awareness through casual conversations and picture sharing with family and close friends, and did not engage in awareness-raising as a broader strategy for social change.

For several students, their newfound awareness led to a structural critique of global inequality. Of the 24 students we interviewed, 7 (29%) made sound structural analyses of the social problems they witnessed on their trips. These students stressed that the response to poverty ought not simply be more charitable acts like free short-term medical services. They pointed to a range of macro-structural causes of social problems, such as the political economy, consumerism in the USA, the World Bank and the power of corporations.

This increase in awareness led to some small-scale actions. Some reported that the IST pushed them to attend more lectures or organize fundraising efforts. Another cluster of students also continued with service and volunteer activities they were involved with before the trip. And for 5 of the 24 students (21%) we spoke with, they said that their IST had had an impact on important decisions they had made about their lives, causing them to change their major fields of study, redirect their career aspirations or make new post-college plans.

Nonetheless, for the majority of the students with whom we spoke, raising awareness seemed to be the extent of their commitment to social change. There seemed to be a common feeling among the students that they had achieved the goals of an IST by completing the journey and discussing their observations within their close social circle upon return. Beyond that, it was not clear to what extent students were taking concrete action to address structural problems they learned about on their IST, in keeping with the profound impact they say the trips had on them. In the context of their definitions of service and activism (to which we will turn in the next section) and their general lack of collective, strategy-oriented thinking about social change, we believe this is less a considered strategic focus on consciousness raising and more a result of not having had the opportunity to consider, evaluate and build skills using various approaches to social change. We are not arguing that this is due to any kind of dispositional limitation on our participants’ part; rather, as we will explain below, it seems to be a result of not having had any structured forum for discussing these larger questions and of not having been exposed to a range of approaches which could potentially inform them of ways in which to achieve large-scale social change. This lack of exposure seems to have led to a mainly stereotypical understanding of activism as an option for social change.

Valorizing service; ambivalence about activism

When asked to discuss service and activism explicitly, most of our interviewees had difficulty defining activism and appeared to have an overall narrow conception of the range of activities it entailed. Additionally, students expressed strong ambivalence and frequently negative associations with activism. In contrast, students had clearer definitions for service, often relating it to how they defined their own engagements, and described it in predominantly positive and uncritical terms.

Students had difficulty articulating a clear definition of activism. They reflected a narrow conception of the activities that comprise activism, indicating that most students had had limited
exposure to activist approaches or to the strong history of activist campaigns. Students’ definitions often focused on descriptions of the people and activities associated with activism and lacked a discussion of what it meant to be an activist or to engage in collective action for social change. For example, students emphasized great leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr rather than focusing on the strategic action of the Civil Rights movement. Interviewees tended towards descriptions of activities as a way to define activism, most commonly referring to protests, rallies and strikes, rather than less confrontational forms of activism, such as targeted political engagement or local movements for sustainability. This narrow understanding of what activism is may help explain participants’ lack of involvement in activist activities.

In addition to a general limited understanding of activism, many students referred to activism as stigmatized; although they did not necessarily know why or did not think it was rightfully stigmatized. When asked about whether activism was positive or negative, Pam stated, ‘for some reason, yeah and I can’t pin point why that would be, but I feel like there’s almost a negative connotation’. Rebecca shared, ‘And with activism, a negative connotation can come with it, which I don’t think is necessarily true, is that it’s an extremist like going like past the point of being reasonable, because you’re so fervent about a goal.’ When they were asked to describe activism, a number of interviewees (33%) qualified their positive associations of activism, stating that activism can be positive, but only if done in a certain way, if ‘it’s respectful and polite’. So, even when interviewees described activism as being generally positive, many added caveats.

When describing their negative associations with activism, the most common recurring association was that activists are radical and rebellious, and activism involves going outside of the norm or acting in an extreme manner. Louise referred to activism as ‘militant’ and Benjamin shared:

Activism I see as more of a radical, extremist opportunity to make a change in terms of shock value; some kind of rebellion … maybe it would be totally skewed because I don’t really have a good definition of activism. But I would say – extreme, close-minded, yeah, rebellion.

Denise also reflected:

With activism, it’s sort of this out there thing to me … also, it just seems like you’re waging – not waging a war, but fighting something instead of working with a problem. … And that’s beneficial in a lot of cases, but I feel like you get further by working with something instead of fighting against.

Students also included problems with activists themselves in their criticism of activism. Several participants (17%) commented that those involved in activism are overly emotional and self-righteous. The same number felt that many people become involved in activism for the image and do not always know the issues well. Louise articulated this point: ‘I kind of have like a … stigma around it – like I just think that those kind of people are really sometimes self-righteous and doing it for an image.’ John described activism this way: ‘Activism – I think is just associated with people who get on lawns and play guitar and play with the hackey-sack.’

We also found that students had a strong preference for service over activism. While descriptions of activism frequently carried with them negative associations and critiques, service was described in predominately positive and uncritical terms. Interviewees described service as doing something for others, and helping others who are in difficulty. Twenty-two of 24 (92%) students positively asserted that service helps people, and that involvement in service is doing something beneficial for someone else. Similar associations were that service is humanizing, involves compassion and empathy, and creates personal relationships. A substantial number (25%) felt that service could not be negative under any circumstances. Benjamin stated, ‘I don’t think you can
really see service in a negative light.’ ‘I always think that there’s nothing but good things that come from service,’ echoed Patricia. Louise reflected, ‘nobody’s going to really have a problem with you trying to help somebody’.

As we described above, in contrast to their more ambivalent discussions of activism, interviewees seemed more comfortable with and uncritical of service. Students may have been more comfortable discussing service due to their more profuse personal experiences with service activities, and the general service-oriented climate of the campus.

**Edging out activism: not all identities are created equal**

Students not only valorized service over activism, but when they form commitments to service identities, it is often done in relation to negative conceptions of activism. When asked whether they were more inclined to get involved with one (service or activism) more than the other, 63% of respondents identified themselves more with service. Of the remaining respondents, three (13%) self-identified with service and activism, three (13%) identified with activism and two did not give clear answers. Overall, the students who self-identified as service-doers seemed more confident in their choice than those who self-identified as activists and often qualified their answers. We acknowledge that these students may already have been on a trajectory of service based on past service experiences; 15 of those we interviewed (63%) had even been on previous service trips either within the USA or abroad. Thus, we do not conclude that these strong positive service orientations are the simple result of IST experiences.

Respondents tended to define themselves as service oriented in three ways. First, as respondents had just discussed their definitions of service and activism in the interviews, several supported their identity choice in service in relation to their negative views of activism and/or their discomfort with its tactics. A second approach was to speak of the merits of service and its fit with respondents’ personalities, without drawing contrasts to activism. Finally, several students spoke about service as being easier than activism, both personally and socially, which highlights some potential structural barriers to activism for these IST returnees. We explore each of these themes below.

Several respondents related their identity choice to their negative view of activism, and their desire not to associate with activists or activism. Louise spoke about activists as:

> … those people like – oh, yeah, social justice, blah blah blah, and I mean that’s not really something I’m trying to do. I’m just, you know, not really trying to have like this image just, like, you know, I’d rather like help people.

Conversely, while not necessarily speaking negatively about activism, some expressed their personal discomfort with what they perceived as activist tactics. In sum, several students seemed to say ‘activism just isn’t my style’. For example, Serena stated, ‘I’m not a huge protestor, I don’t like conflict … I definitely think it’s necessary and I guess I just don’t feel comfortable in those situations.’ Similarly, Suzie said, ‘activism for me is more extreme, I think, and I prefer quietness and subtlety’. Finally, Angela spoke of being service-oriented because, ‘I think of activism [as] a political thing I guess, and I don’t know if that’s really me.’ Thus, respondents seemed to see activists as possessing some personality traits or skills that they simply did not have or did not want to have.

Most students speaking about their service identity related positive notions about service, even if not in contrast to activism. These responses centered on service being a good fit with respondents’ personalities and/or skill sets. For example, Patricia referred to her comfort with service because:
I think of myself as, you know, very people oriented, you know, friendly, it’s always easy to talk with people, and I feel like, communication is just one of the major things that really helps to kind of shape that kind of change and that stems from service anyway.

The themes of connecting with people and a preference for ‘hands on’ activities were prominent in respondents’ comments regarding their service identities. Angela echoed this, ‘I guess I like hands on stuff. I like hands on, face to face connections and interactions and directly working with those people … for me service has been the way I can do that.’ Several students spoke about these identity concerns as ‘personal decisions’ or issues of personal choice, and David naturalized his service identity, stating, ‘Because it all, it just works for me, it’s a natural thing, it’s a personal decision, it’s the service part of my life.’

Several respondents spoke about having a service identity because they saw service as being easier than activism. One connotation of this statement was that service is inherently an easier activity that does not call for special skills, so students feel less intimidated by it. The second is that service is more readily available to students, and that students experience barriers to getting involved with activism. Regarding the first point, students made statements like Kimberly’s:

>I think getting involved with service is a little easier than activism so I don’t know, I’m not a very good leader … It’s hard for me to be a leader. Like, just like being so small nobody really listens to me so, I don’t know, service is easier. I would like to be more of an activist, but, it’s just been easier for me to be more of a service person.

Statements like these reveal that students may have a desire to become activists, but they are lacking in the training and/or experience that they perceive as necessary to achieve this identity.

Some students highlighted that there are greater opportunities to get involved in service than in activism. For example, Claudia stated:

>I think maybe some opportunities are more kind of well-defined and set-up for you, so maybe it is more practical to participate in service-related activities than activism. I would say convenience to be honest, it’s just scheduling. Like, ‘Hey there’s a group going to the food bank at this time.’

Students’ comments revealed that service is a more readily available construct than activism and that they have not come away from their ISTs with increased confidence or skills to engage in activism. Our focus group with members of the undergraduate community to discuss the preliminary findings of our study confirmed this sentiment; students spoke about an imbalance of campus opportunities geared toward service over activism and how this shaped their engagement and identities.

Discussion and recommendations

Our results show that ISTs are creating a noteworthy ethic for social change but are failing to create understandings of how to enact this change. In a positive sense, this indicates that ISTs provide a critical point in student development where they may solidify a continued commitment to civic activities. However, the majority of our sample left with a feeling of dissonance, having only the means to create more awareness in others and lacking strategies to address the social problems they observed at home or abroad. An understanding of activism was also underdeveloped, despite its well-documented strength of collective action and strategic approaches to addressing the roots of social problems. The emergent problem is that activism, either as an ideology or a skill set, is being
downplayed on ISTs. This is in some ways an unsurprising conclusion given, as we document above, that ISTs tend to have objectives of community service and student learning (Crabtree, 2008). Nonetheless, these ISTs also emphasize the teaching and/or accomplishment of social justice aims, which are objectives not yet reconciled with critiques of charity-oriented service approaches. The privileging of service we observed within ISTs entails more than just a transition from one type of beneficial activity to another, but a dynamic that reinforces a polarity between service and activism. ISTs provide a crucial point where students reflect on their identities as civicly engaged people but rather than find a balance, the segregation between service and activist communities is left unexamined.

Our method of considering service and activism in our interviews allowed us to uncover a competing relationship between the two. In line with Chatterton’s (2006) analysis, students acknowledged how activism is socially stigmatized. While many students valorized service without question, some students felt uneasy defaulting to a service identity, acknowledging some of the drawbacks cited around charity (Illich, 1968; Marullo et al., 2000; King, 2004). Students wishing to make social change may feel they are caught between a service oriented identity that does not do enough and an activist identity that risks social stigma, as Chatterton (2006) suggests. Using Harre’s (2007) identity project model, we can see that the choice of a service or activist identity project has real consequences. Despite their grouping under the general heading of civic engagement, these identities do not always flow into one another and often have defined borders that we observed in our interviews. Our data show that developing a service identity comes at the expense of building bridges to activism, and instead reinforces the underlying values of charity.

From our results, we argue that service is eclipsing activism and ISTs are reinforcing this trend. These trips, in the ways they crafted service and immersion experiences, and in their attention to – and importantly, lack of attention to – informing and preparing students to engage in service and/or activism upon return, were a piece of students’ understandings of civic engagement. While we certainly recognize that students’ identity choices have also been shaped and reinforced by past experiences, social opportunities and other structural factors, we conceive of ISTs as a unique space within which students can explore and construct service and/or activist identities. The construction of these identities will be shaped by the identity space that the trip facilitates. The service trips our respondents attended ranged from about 10 days to 3 weeks in length, and only a few of the programs involved substantive participant meetings prior to and/or after the trips. Thus, trip facilitators have limited time in which to create experiential learning, impart skills, and build confidence among participants around their personal identity with engagement, whether service, activism and/or other modes of involvement.

Plugging this analysis back into a social model facilitates an understanding of why, at the macro level, we are seeing a widespread embracement of service and a marginalization of activists. Our study site, as we mentioned, has a strong service culture and it is no surprise then, that when faced with the overwhelming choice of what to do, the choice of least resistance and greatest opportunity was service. But again, an unexamined culture of service leads to a narrow understanding of the types of social change activities that are available. Given the downplaying of activism both within personal and collective contexts, it seems that a structured activist learning component within ISTs could begin to fill the void.

Our recommendations build from where social awareness embedded in service programs leave off, and call for a deliberate incorporation of activist skills, and discussion of the history and ideology of activism. While we recognize that many, perhaps most, trips do not explicitly aim to create activist identities among participants, we view activist identity construction as a critical component
of ISTs if they are to realize their frequently stated objectives of social justice. Service practitioners can create structured experiences that simultaneously build an understanding of the role of agency in social justice and social change and begin to break down long-standing social stigma related to activism. Furthermore, students can benefit from learning concrete skills for social change, enabling them to translate their desire to engage into actions toward social justice.

Most ISTs set aside time for reflection and learning that could also be used to impart skills that focus on strategic action and organizing. We recommend that training modules could include public speaking on social issues, building alliances and coalitions, fundraising, community mobilizing, creating strategic actions plans, designing and carrying out campaigns, and working with media (including writing op eds, letters to the editor and press releases). The inclusion of such modules would provide concrete tools that could be transposed to the campus and beyond.

In addition to skill-building, sensitizing students to the history and ideology of activism in different social settings would be an important step. Students in our study sometimes described activities that were activist in ideology and orientation, but did not label them as activism or understand how these activities were connected to past activist movements, like the Civil Rights movement. By connecting the student activism they see on their campus to the types of strategies necessary to address structural change, students can build a stronger understanding of the role of activism in addressing social problems.

Our study shows that we cannot simply hope for the best from service programs to inspire students to develop change-making strategies. There are social forces at work that are imbued in the service culture that are, either intentionally or unintentionally, inhibiting the examination or experimentation with other forms of civic engagement activities. The final prognosis is that service practitioners ought to include activist skills, examples and definitions in their programs, working to explicitly address the relationship between service and activism. Our focus group discussion where we presented our findings to undergraduate students not only corroborated our results but emphasized the need for programs and structures that address the tensions and stereotypes surrounding service and activism. These types of discussions are what we hope to catalyze with our study, ones where we ask why and how some social change activities are privileged over others and if there may be consequences for student development when certain types are left out of the discussion. It is our hope that service programs can make space for a deeper discussion of activism but we also believe activist communities will benefit by seeing the pivotal role service programs can play in actions for social change. The relationship between service and activism can be altered from one of wary competition to one of respectful collaboration and mutual reinforcement.

Notes
1. We are aware that the categories of ‘service’ and ‘activism’ are complex, and that any practical definition of each would likely overlap. We have intentionally established, for the purpose of this study, and in order to provoke greater conversation, a discursive binary of the two terms. This binary usage allows us to parse out some of the nuances between service and activism and view them as a dialectic. Thus, while we accept a certain degree of elusiveness in the terminology, we find that the two terms do have some discreteness, and the discussion of civic engagement is enhanced by considering those distinctions so that a stronger balance may be achieved.
2. Please note that names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of study participants.
3. We assert this with the qualification that we understand that for some students, transformations towards greater civic engagement due to IST experiences could take place much later, even years after a trip. Our interviews were carried out in the fall of 2007 with students who had participated in trips during the 2006/7 academic year.
References


Illich I (1968) To hell with good intentions. Address at the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects (CIASP), Cuernavaca, Mexico.


