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# **The Worth of What They Do**

**The Impact of Short-term Immersive Jewish Service-Learning on Host Communities**

**An Exploratory Study**

December 13, 2010

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# Immersive Jewish Service-Learning

- Key Program Elements
  - ◆ Full-time direct service in response to genuine, unmet community needs
  - ◆ Structured learning and time for reflection
  - ◆ Context of Jewish education and values
  - ◆ Short-term programs: one to four weeks in length; offered by a wide variety of organizations
- Research and Evaluation
  - ◆ Focus to date primarily on participant outcomes
  - ◆ Increasing interest on understanding community impact

# Purpose of the Study

To explore the impacts of short-term immersive Jewish service-learning (IJSL) on communities and organizations that host these groups

- ◆ Not an evaluation of IJSL programs
- ◆ Expectation that study will lead to further research of practice

## *Research Questions:*

- What are the **positive, negative and unintended impacts** of short-term IJSL on host communities?
- What do IJSL programs currently do to **create and maintain relationships** with communities?
- What are **promising practices** for creating and maintaining relationships with host communities?

# Methods

- **18 Key Informant Interviews**

- ◆ 13 interviews with host community representatives and in-country IJSL practitioner liaisons
  - 5 domestic
  - 3 Israeli
  - 5 International (Nicaragua, Ghana, Ukraine)
- ◆ 5 interviews with staff of AJWS, Hillel, JDC, JFSJ, Yeshiva University
- ◆ Findings apply equally to domestic, international and Israel-based programs

- **Materials Review**

- ◆ Recent relevant research and writing about best practices in secular and faith-based service learning



# Limitations

- Study focuses on host communities with excellent relationships with experienced IJSL practitioner organizations
  - ◆ Findings are not generalizable to all short-term IJSL programs
- Awareness of potential for bias in data collection
  - ◆ Interview protocols and interviewer training designed to help mitigate bias



# Impacts

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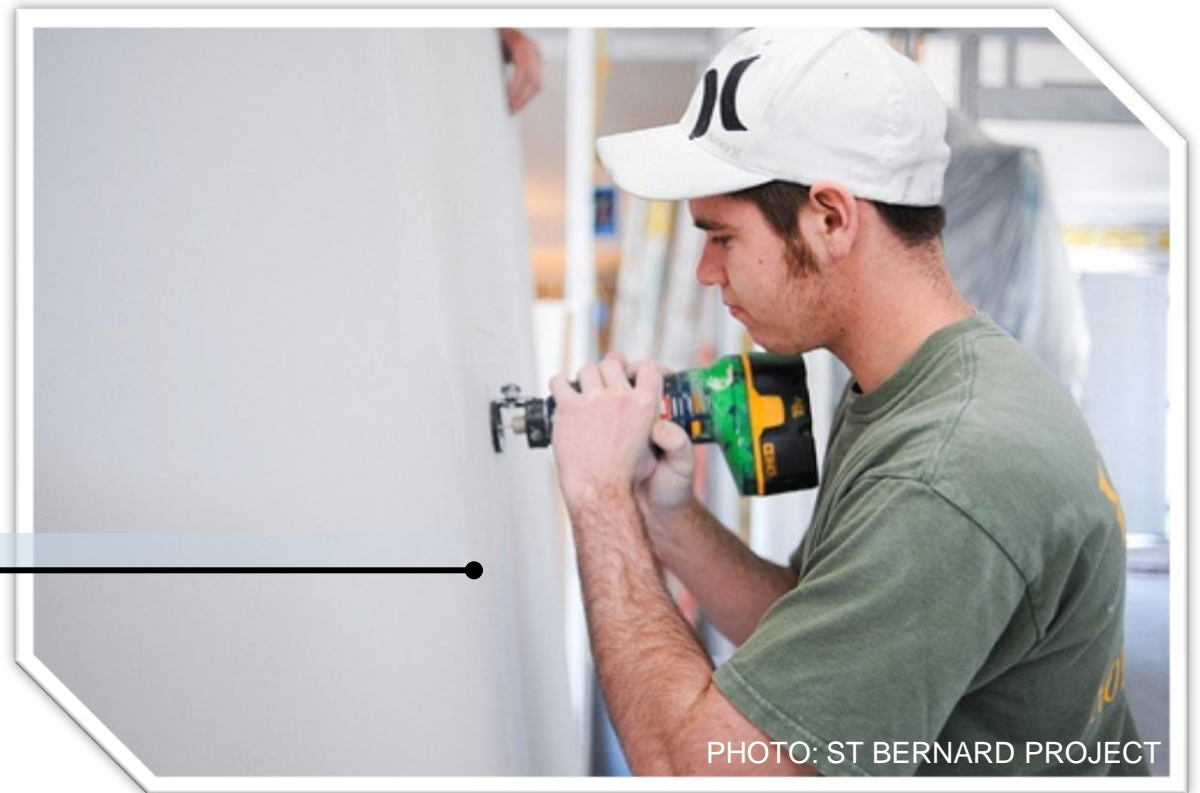


PHOTO: ST BERNARD PROJECT

# Overarching Finding

Positive host community experiences are tied to **practices** and **partnerships** put into place by IJSL programs

# **When...**

the project is well planned and executed

negative impacts are anticipated

potential problems are addressed proactively

**... positive impacts predominate**

# Short-Term Host Community Outcomes

- Meeting community expectations about completing concrete, discrete tasks such as contributing to building houses or cleaning up parks or schools
- Additional immediate, yet unanticipated, benefits:
  - ◆ Jump starting residents into participating in service
  - ◆ Developing community leaders
  - ◆ Receiving resources they would not otherwise have, such as building or construction tools and supplies
  - ◆ Providing a rich cultural exchange with volunteers

# Longer Lasting Host Community Impacts

- Expanded host community capacity is sustained after the project is over:
  - ◆ New knowledge
  - ◆ Strengthened intra-community communications
  - ◆ More effective leaders



## *In their own words*

*“Is the trip is a good investment or [should they] just give this money for poor people here? **I would host two or three trips during the year instead of taking the money.** What happens from the trip is more important than just giving another \$10–\$20 to a poor family.... It’s not charity that you give and then it's gone. We are planting a seed, it will grow and will become bigger in many ways.”*

In-country Representative

# Current Practices



PHOTO: ST BERNARD PROJECT

# Successful Current Practices in High Performing Partnerships

- Shared vision and values
- Shared realistic expectations
- Consistent communication and personal connection
- Shared decision making



## *In their own words*

*“It is not enough for an organization to have the will for this work. An organization also needs human resources, a proper team with knowledge, and a strong organizational structure.”*

Host Community CBO/NGO leader

# Host Community Readiness

## Factors for Success

- Sufficient time and staff capacity for planning and a stable structure for implementation, including a point person responsible for organization and planning
- Understanding of the limitations of volunteers, such as a low level of technical ability and their accommodation needs
- Good relationships between the on-the-ground CBO/NGO and community residents
- Flexibility in working with schedules of volunteers
- Adherence to safety criteria

## *In their own words*

*“When the volunteers are told ahead of time what to expect, it’s so good. They need to have in mind that it’s hard work. The homeowner has lost everything—be careful, this is somebody’s home, their bedroom. They need to understand **the worth of what they do.**”*

Host Community CBO/NGO leader

*“We need partners who show understanding by being **flexible**. If we have to leave a site early because that’s our only chance to hear an amazing speaker and they don’t understand that, we run into trouble.”*

IJSL practitioner

# IJSL Organizational Readiness

## Factors for Success

- Commitment and resources to thoroughly prepare student volunteers prior to the trip
- Student volunteers who are open, reliable, willing to learn and work hard, and eager to connect with the host community
- Well trained, well prepared group leaders
- Sensitivity to the financial constraints of communities
- Flexibility and humility
- Clear, enforced safety policies
- Thorough screening processes to identify the right participants
- Ongoing reflection about how to meet host community needs

## *In their own words*

*“The only thing it would be best to avoid—but how?—is the **difficulty of separation** at the end of the week of volunteering.”*

Host Community CBO/NGO leader

*“There are some things about us and our work that aren’t always easy for partners. We require **accommodation** for kosher meals, time for Shabbat, space to stay, space to meet. Our timeline can be a challenge.”*

IJSL practitioner

# Working Through Challenges

- Challenges inherent to short-term IJSL:
  - ◆ Steep learning curve in the first year
  - ◆ Limits on what can be achieved in a short time period
  - ◆ Difficulty in parting when volunteers leave
  - ◆ Changing priorities or funding decisions of IJSL organizations
- Challenges that can be minimized by good practices:
  - ◆ Providing accommodations for volunteers
  - ◆ Language barriers
  - ◆ Cultural competency of volunteers

## *In their own words*

*“Their commitment to the learning end of service-learning is the key. Building community involves a learning process. There’s a lot of service that is just help, but not real learning ... They [IJSL volunteers] do it right. The relationship between faith and service and community organizing really shows.”*

Host Community CBO/NGO leader