A Service-Learning Approach to Managing Diversity in International Business Education

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Abstract

This paper highlights challenges facing today's international business (IB) education in developing a global mindset: 1) the complex personal backgrounds from the increasingly diverse college student demographics and 2) teaching materials focused on western MNEs practices and theories. To overcome these challenges, we propose a virtual service-learning project that focuses on forming partnerships to assist small businesses located in remote, rural and under resourced regions. Through the project students were able to engage in intercultural interactions while applying IB concepts to a small business setting. In a pilot study, we find that this project helps appeal to a diverse student background and allows students to draw connections from their own unique backgrounds and skillsets throughout the process of developing a global mindset. The result of the project demonstrates a positive impact on both students' academic and professional learning outcomes.

Introduction

Since international business (IB) became a mainstream business subject, improving students' knowledge and ability to interpret and evaluate global issues to develop a global mindset, has been a top priority by educators (Clifford & Montgomery, 2017). To achieve a global mindset, IB education and research has focused on promoting the benefits of immersive international experiences such as study abroad (Paik, 2020; Ramburuth & Daniel, 2011; Rexeisen & Al-Khatib, 2009; Witte, 2010). Study aboard has been found to increase interpersonal skills and understanding of international business practices as well as increase students' career opportunities (Orahood, Kruze, & Pearson, 2004).

Yet, despite these benefits of study abroad as an effective tool to cultivate global mindset, there are two challenges in today's IB programs. First, the students' ability to study abroad is hampered by shifting student demographics and rising college costs. The increasingly diverse backgrounds and life phases among today's college students make it difficult for them to participate in study abroad programs. Second, bridging the structural disparities between the Global North, mostly western affluent nations, and the Global South, predominately found in Africa and some parts of Asia, to create equitable remains a struggle (Jotia, Biraimah, & Kurtz, 2020). Specifically, today's IB curriculum are mainly based on the theories and practices of western-based large multinational enterprises (MNEs), and less catered toward small businesses and/or under resourced regions.

Given these challenges, it is widely understood that building diverse and inclusive international business curricula is important. In this paper, we explore how international business education can embrace intercultural interactions while still meeting the diverse needs of students. We share a service-learning project utilized in a capstone Global Strategy course where students

are partnered with small business owners located in rural under resourced regions. Over the course of the semester, the student-business owner partnerships work together to develop solutions for actual business problems faced by the business owners. In addition to the experience of a different cultural environment, on the project focuses on fostering students' empathy and understanding by allowing students to organically form relationships with the business owners located in a different country. Thus, we believe this project helps answer calls for shifting the perspectives of students located in the Global North through relationship building (Schneider, 2018) as well as responding to calls for inclusive IB curriculum (Aggarwal & Wu, 2022) by introducing an approach that incorporates the changes and challenges faced by today's business students. We also discuss the additional benefits of the project of developing students' professional skills and integrating the United National Sustainability Goals (UN SDG) into the IB curriculum.

Challenges in Today's IB Curriculum

Changes in the student demographic and type of firms engaging in international business is creating a need to design curriculum that meets these changes. In particular, students are increasingly coming from diverse backgrounds with low-income, first-generation and/or adult learning representing a substantial portion of the student body. In the U.S., the percentage of low-income students consisted of over 43% in 2016 compared to 26% in 2000 (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). Furthermore, half of all entering college students identify as being first-generation college students with the percentage rising to over 60% in schools of lower selectivity (Startz, 2022). Likewise, adult learners, defined as students aged 25 and older according to the Lumina Foundation, represent 38% of the college population (EAB, 2019). Thus, notion of a traditional college student is becoming antiquated as students identify with multiple categories.

Furthermore, for most college students, due to tuition rising faster than income, working while in school is the norm. Among adult-learners, the percentage of working students rises to 58%, while among first-generation students, this percentage rises to 66% (EAB, 2019). Alongside income gap, working while in college impacts available time for studies. For example, first-generation students are likely to work twice as many hours per week compared to their continuing generation peers. As a result, students, especially commuters, have less flexibility to participate in co-curricular activities outside of class time. Meanwhile, students are also more likely to work in food service, sales, and administrative support fields in non-managerial positions, therefore are less likely to develop skills and/or experience in fields that relate to their career goals (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). As a result, students face challenges in finding the time and opportunities to engage in activities and/or work in areas that relate to their career goals. This in turn can translate into the lack of opportunities to network and form mentorships to provide career advice, resulting in disparity of post-graduation employment outcomes (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Goodwin, 1998).

Second, building in students a global mindset that bridges the structural disparities between the Global North and the Global South remains a struggle (Jotia, Biraimah, & Kurtz, 2020). When pursuing an IB education, students have limited opportunities to engage outside their immediate surroundings. To overcome this, an effective and commonly recommended method of instilling global mindset and intercultural competence is study abroad or international exchange programs. However, for students from lower income families, these touted methods are out of reach due to financial and time pressures and represent higher opportunity costs compared to their peers (Feng, 2016). Despite the availability of financial aid, studying abroad can incur many extra expenses not incurred domestically. Relatedly, students also often lack the financial

security to go without an income for the extended period of time spent abroad and lack the flexibility and/or assurance from employers that their jobs will still be available upon their return. In fact, only 2% of the world student population can benefit from a period of study abroad according to the 5th Global Survey on Internationalization of Higher Education, and, as of 2018, more than 70% of students studying abroad in the U.S. are white (Marinoni & De Wit, 2019; NCES, 2020). Furthermore, despite the majority of students studying abroad in Europe, many American universities are encouraging students to study abroad in "non-traditional" locations in the Global South. As a result, study abroad to a Global South country can be viewed as "a kind of voyeurism in which privileged young Americans go to observe relative poverty in a developing country" (Woolf, 2006, p. 136). Thus, despite the benefits of study abroad, utilizing study abroad to instill a global mindset in students can be challenging.

Building a global mindset that can avoid a Global North dominant view is further complicated by IB concepts based largely on western MNEs. With globalization becoming digitalized, the landscape of firms conducting international business is also changing. SMEs are now responsible for 60-70% of businesses globally and increasingly become involved in global trade as an important player in global value chains. Yet, the majority of IB concepts are still largely based on western MNEs. The heavy focus on MNEs can be problematic for two reasons. First, a study from Intelligent.com shows that 60% of recent college graduates would like to start their own business. Second, during their college careers, many students support themselves by working at small medium sized enterprises rather than large MNEs. For students, MNEs' internationalization, although interesting, can be considered less relevant to their career interests or path. For instance, the important strategic concepts of industry, resource, and institutional-based views in the internationalization context are often more theoretical than practical. Students

often have no to little exposure to large scale foreign market entry strategies or expatriates'
management when they are working in non-managerial positions for domestic small businesses,
such as local restaurants or retail services. Thus, there is an emergent need for IB educators to
address these challenges and adjust our teaching contents and practices to promote global
mindset by IB education.

An Application of Service-Learning in IB

In this section, we seek to address the challenges outlined above by answering how IB
education can still create a global mindset while overcoming the diverse backgrounds of our
students and avoiding a Global North mindset by utilizing service learning. Service learning in
higher education has emerged as a central component of efforts to link community service and
academic study (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Felten & Clayton, 2011). Students participate
in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs. They reflect on the
service activity to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the
disciplines, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (Bringle, Hatcher,
& McIntosh, 2006). Students have shown significant positive effects on learning outcomes
including academic performance, civic learning, or various professional skills (Astin,
Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Service-learning projects can be broadly utilized in both lower and higher-level courses
to fit the learning objectives of different subjects. It is typical for instructors to partner with local
community partners to provide students with service-learning activities. For IB related activities,
students can support local small business to conduct foreign market research for exporting
initiatives; students can also work with local economic agencies to evaluate the attractiveness of

foreign investments. Those service activities allow students to apply their knowledge of IB toward a real-life experience.

In addition, service-learning projects can also be ideal for students from diverse backgrounds. Having many employability skills such as high motivation, resilience, and hard-working (Banerjee, 2016; Dowey, 2013), students still face a gap between work experiences and entry level skills needed for their career (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). Students often lack opportunities to reflect on how their current work experiences connect to the classroom and vice-versa (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). As a result, connecting what is learned in the classroom to their own work experiences is critical. Service learning can help overcome this gap due to actively involve the learners and increase students' perception of what they learned (Vizenor, Souza, & Ertmer, 2017). Therefore, we expect that a service-learning approach in IB education can greatly motivate and benefit students learning by connecting their own personal experience to what they are learning in the classroom.

A Cross-border Consulting Project as Service-Learning

In this paper, we draw upon our experiences piloting a virtual service-learning project in conjunction with the non-profit educational organization, Global Brigades during the Spring semester of 2022. Our college is an undergraduate teaching-focused public institution located in the Northeast region of the U.S. The majority of students at our institution are students that identify as low-income, minority adult learners and/or first-generation colleges student. 95% of the student population are commuters, working part-time or full-time.

Throughout the semester, students partner with small business owners located in rural Panama with the objective of developing practical and sustainable business solutions. Aside from two pre-scheduled meetings between the students and the business owners, students were

directly responsible for finding the best means of communicating with the business owners so that the students and owners could formulate business solutions together. As a result, students were able to organically engage in international interactions that are essential for IB education while organically forging relationships and building accountability with the business owners as the semester progressed.

The pilot run of Global Brigades project was conducted with a class of 13 senior students consisting of eight male students and five female students, with the majority of students identifying as first-generation college students. As the businesses are family run and located in areas with weak infrastructure, students are challenged to come up with solutions that work with limited resources. The entire project was held virtually with students meeting with the business owners in Panama through video conferencing. In addition, students also had the opportunity to receive feedback from professional mentors who had previously partaken in the same project.

Due to various constraints and differences in terms of access to digital devices, conditions at home, work schedules, etc., engaging in virtual activities outside of class time can be difficult for students. As a result, the instructor largely utilized in-class time and equipment to support students' virtual interactions with external project partners. For example, the instructor designated a large part of in-class time as "work" sessions for client meetings, problem discussions, and group work coordination. Utilizing in-class time was considered essential step to maximizing inclusiveness and minimize possible disparity with diverse student population as the pilot class. Furthermore, by utilizing class time, this allows students to become better managers by determining which tasks should be worked on in class and which tasks could be worked on individually. As with all group projects, managing group dynamics remained

challenging but having class time devoted to the project helped create rapport and in turn, better coordination within the student groups.

Benefits of the Practice

Integrating IB Concepts in the Context of SME with "Distances"

The first goal of the project was to help students apply global strategic management concepts in the context of SMEs located in rural and under resourced regions of Panama. In addition to providing students exposure without physically visiting Panama, we also sought to incorporate IB strategic management concepts to help students draw connections between traditional concepts and analytical tools covered in IB textbooks with the project. This was critical as we wanted to ensure students were able to see how textbook examples focused on Global North MNEs can also be applied to Global South businesses and SMEs.

First, students have a great asset in their experiences and general knowledge but often are unable to see relevance to transfer knowledge from one setting to another. Therefore, our goal was to support students connecting the IB concepts with their own life experience of being local with constrained resources, and most important, how to utilize limited resources for success. Throughout the project, faculty-lead discussion and reflection linked to the curriculum was a crucial element to ensure relevant IB concepts were learned and connected to students' own experiences and future careers. For example: essential IB concepts of PEST analysis, industry analysis, the resource-based-view in cross-border settings, standardization vs. adaptation in a market with "distances", and strategy implementation in different international markets were all topics discussed and covered for the project.

In the beginning of the semester, in-class activities focused on analyzing larger well-known firms. Focusing on such big firms that everyone knows helped students first understand

the purpose of each analysis and the type of questions to ask in an analysis without requiring students to conduct additional research on the firms being analyzed. As the semester progressed, students would be asked to repeat their analysis but this time, using simpler terminology as opposed to the terminology used in the textbook. Later, the same activities were repeated using the businesses that they work at and then later again, only using their clients as the subject. When working on the project, students were asked to work backwards by brainstorming issues and then categorizing the issues by the type of analysis needed to resolve the issue. For example, for several of the clients, transportation was an issue limiting growth while for others, it was having nearby competition. Instead of jumping straight into resolutions, the tools such as Porter's 5 forces, VRIO were used to better understand the situation. Other times, potential resolutions that were mainly top of mind for students would be discussed in class with students applying again strategic tools to determine the feasibility and strength of the various solutions. In doing so, students were able to see how the tools learned in class can be applied to all businesses-big and small, global, and local.

Second, the context of Panama also provided an opportunity to apply institution-based considerations. Students could use PESTEL analysis to understand the business environment of Panama from macro perspective. However, working with the small business owners, who often started their small business for necessity to make a living, students learned the concept of formal institutions (local law or regulations) to start a mom-pop store. But most importantly, students learned the concept of informal institution and institution voids. For example, students learned how the relationship-based transaction based on personal credit posted a challenge to the cash-flow and inventory turns for the grocery store owners. Also, students were able to learn how technology can act as a critical resource as several of the owners did not have access to a

computer nor use basic spreadsheet software to track their income or inventory management. All those institutional-based constraints helped students to understand the important role of resources for a business and how those resources can differ on an institutional level.

At the same time, to avoid a Global North dominant mindset that can lack empathy, we sought to continue to encourage students to find parallels with their own surroundings such as their own workplaces or small businesses operated by family members. This helped encourage students to share their own experiences working in SMEs. This allowed us to then naturally extend the discussion to consider how these SMEs could expand into other markets and potential entry methods.

Providing International Exposure through Cross-border Virtual Interactions

The second objective was to provide students international exposure through virtual interactions as an alternative option of studying abroad. Through the virtual international exposure, students can "attain a fundamental cultural knowledge of the world based on an understanding of and appreciation for, differences in ways of life, including cultural norms, practices and beliefs." (Annavarjula & Trifts, 2012). Although these differences can be experienced in a multitude of ways, for this project, one direct method experienced by our students was through the language barrier. As the business owners spoke Spanish and very little, if any English, students experienced firsthand the challenges of conducting business in a different language. Although there were a few students that could speak Spanish fluently, the majority of the students had to rely on translators and or translation apps to communicate. As a result, students experienced the frustration of "lost-in-translation" when clients seemingly spoke in detail but the English translation resulted in only a few short sentences. Likewise, students that spoke Spanish fluently also were able to experience the challenges of conveying contextual

details to their teammates as well as experience the linguistic differences found within Spanish-speaking regions.

Enhancing Students' Learning Process

Third, the project enabled us to incorporate an equity lens to enhance students learning process by examining the effectiveness of service learning compared to other traditional learning methods. Research show memory-based assessments favor wealthy, white, and driven students as the use of memory-based assessments can discourage disadvantaged students and set them up for failure (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, 2020). Hence, it is important incorporates non-traditional assessment methods to assess specific learning outcomes of the service learning. We first asked students to what extent they enjoyed various assignments for the course. Compared with other traditional teaching approaches such as quizzes, weekly multiple-choice questions, and case studies, the students enjoyed the service-learning project the most with an average score of 8.82/10, which highlights students' preference for service-learning projects. Figure 1 indicates the level of enjoyments for different teaching approaches.
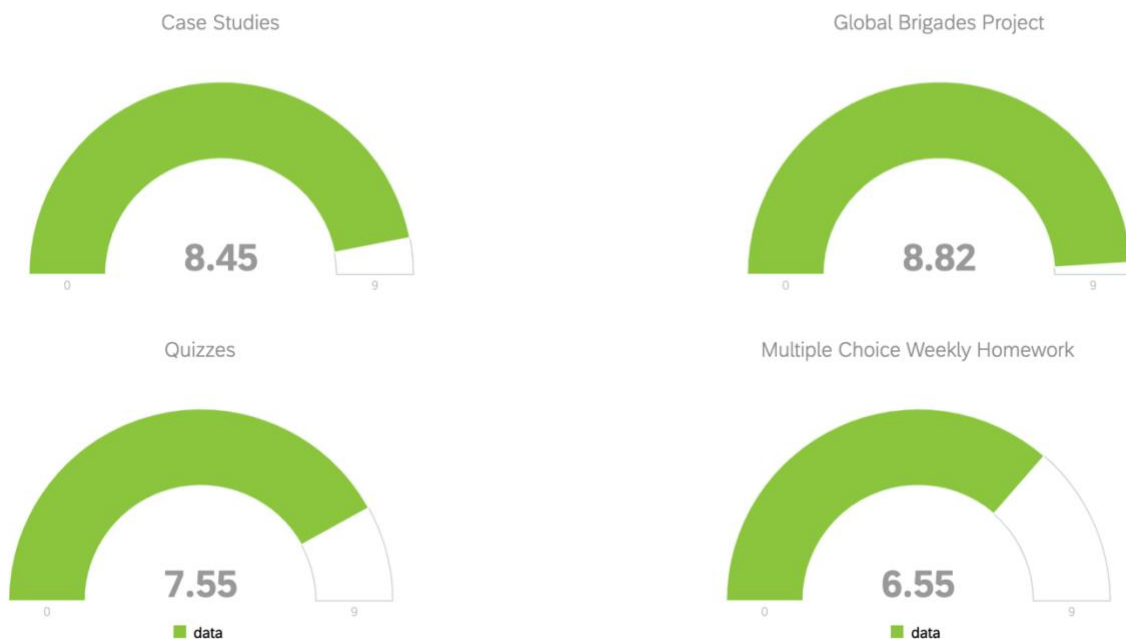
Case Studies

8.45

0   9

Global Brigades Project

8.82

0   9

Quizzes

7.55

0   9

■ data

Multiple Choice Weekly Homework

6.55

0   9

■ data

Figure 1 The Level of Enjoyment for Different Teaching Approaches

We next evaluated if they have achieved specific learning goals through the project, specifically, critical thinking in the context of international business. Critical thinking skill was important as we wanted students to realize how the skills required for the project can build upon the skills they already have from their current jobs and personal upbringing and in turn prepare them for their future careers. Figure 2 indicates that students considered the project effectively supports their developing their problem solving and creative thinking skills (both average 9.09/10) supported by their comments:

Ability to problem solve

9.09

0   10

Think creatively/out of the box

9.09

0   10

Figure 2 Academic Learning Outcomes

"The meetings with the client ensured what problems we are trying to solve. The meetings with the professionals helped us reach to the solutions"

"It helped a lot with my ability to solve problem. The project made me think outside the box and made me get out of my comfort zone."

"It was helpful because it made me use all the tools I learned during my undergrad and apply it in a real-life scenario. An amazing experience."

Enhancing Professional Growth

Last, studies suggest exposure to a wide range of people and experiences can lead to personal growth outcomes (Felten & Clayton, 2011). Likewise, the project was a suitable

approach to support professional growth. First, professionalism was grown via interactions with the professional mentors, who were all currently working young professionals and fellow alumni of the Global Brigades program. Throughout the project, students had several opportunities to present their work and receive feedback from mentors. The set feedback sessions provided students opportunities to practice presenting outside the safety of the classroom as well as opportunities to receive advice on how to better present the information.

Second, professionalism was improved by organic opportunities to network and see first-hand potential career outcomes. For students of disadvantaged groups, opportunities to network can be limited. Through the project, the meetings with mentors provided organic methods to establish ties with the mentors. As the mentors are all former participants of the Global Brigades project, they also offered insight into how the project helped with their careers. When asking what students liked the most about the project, students often talked about the positive impact of the mentorship in addition to the real-life applicability of the project.

"The part that I liked most was that we had our mentorships feedback which it was really helpful because we were able to modify our ideas in order to get good suggestions for our client."

"What I like the most was the mentors. They guided us through feedback with ideas that we could implement on our clients' business."

"Global Brigades was effective in developing my communication skills because we receive feedbacks from our mentors that help us to deliver better solutions for our client."

Figure 4 show students' responses on how effective the project was in developing professionalism in communication, cultural sensitivity, critical and analytical thinking and

resilience. As the result indicated, students found the project extremely useful in developing communication skills and cultural sensitivity.

Figure 3 Professional Development Outcomes

Below are several students' comments regarding the outcomes of professional development through the project:

"Global Brigades helped me to develop my public speaking skills and my leadership skills working as a group."

"It made me overcome personal challenges such as nervousness when speaking to an audience. Professionally it helped me further develop a mindset of critical thinking."

"Global Brigades was effective in developing my communication skills because we receive feedbacks from our mentors that help us to deliver better solutions for our client.

Future Opportunities: Integration of UN SDG

Research shows that participation in service learning has compelling long-term impact on continuous political and community involvement by students, especially when supported by faculty-led reflection (Felten & Clayton, 2011). When designed carefully, IB educators can successfully integrate one or more of the 17 UN SDGs into service-learning projects by either increasing positive externalities and/or reducing negative externalities (Montiel, Cuervo-Cazurra, Park, Antolín-López, & Husted, 2021). For the Global Brigades project, due to the nature of the clients located in lower-income areas of rural Panama, our focus was on contributing to UN Sustainable Goal #8, Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, and #10, Reducing inequality within and among countries. The students provided solutions based on the limited resources the clients were facing, a wonderful context to understand the IB concepts such as resource-based-view, firm specific advantages, especially to develop capability with limited resources.

In addition to academic concepts, the project also helped students understand income and resource disparities in a cross-border business context. For example, all of the clients relied on their cell phone to join the meetings. Delays due to connectivity were common especially during inclement weather. Likewise, for some, there were issues in accessing the nearest big city due to transportation. On the other hand, such issues forced students to rely on less traditional methods of communicating by using messaging apps such as WhatsApp as opposed to email and also relying on translating apps such as Google Translate when translators or non-Spanish speakers were not available. This helped students see firsthand how income disparity can impact business. In the beginning many business solutions suggested by students were very lofty, such as hiring additional workers, purchasing expensive equipment, etc. however, toward the end, recommendations became much more realistic and focused more on "Do it yourself" type

solutions. The continual interactions helped students develop a better understanding of the business environment in low-income countries. At the end, several students mentioned that they would like to keep in touch with the business owners through the messaging apps. Thus this project highlights that student can build genuine relationships even through virtual interactions.

Last, Figure 3 shows that students developed an awareness of global inequalities and sustainable development from the project despite the course's focus on global strategy concepts. This can be largely credited to students forming relationships with the clients and thus becoming a collective whole. As a student comments, "we became as a team with our group members to help our client, understand, and try to solve his problems." Yet, as another student commented, this project helped create an "understanding of global inequalities since we sometimes take for granted the amenities we have."
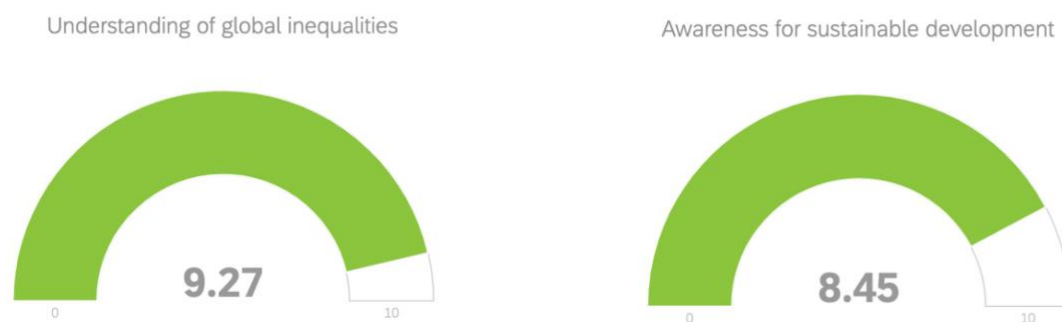

Figure 4 Civil Learning Outcomes

Conclusion, Implication, and Future Directions

In this paper, we highlight the challenges of IB education due to the increasingly diverse student backgrounds and a Global North MNE dominated teaching focus. Today, many students hold a different set of characteristics and personal experience compared to those with resources and prestige in their life, therefore, we must not only undertake the challenges brought by the global inequality, but also address the diverse needs in our classroom and provide students learning support with an equity lens (Lederer, Hoban, Lipson, Zhou, & Eisenberg, 2021). Only

by doing so, we can be truly inclusive to every student and every business and continue to actualize the values of IB education.

Through this paper, we call for the attention of IB educators to the diversity existing in today's college students: instead of creating value through international exposure, which can feel distant, we should utilize students' own experiences to support specific learning outcomes with an equity lens; Instead of focusing on the global manager in a multinational firm, we suggest relating IB concepts with their local/small businesses work experience and structuring the education in a way to allow students to draw connections between their own experiences and concepts learned in the classroom. As Carnevale and Smith (2018, p. 8) point out, "Reflective learning on the job, the work-based equivalent of metacognition, is essential because it empowers working learners to think intentionally about their future career trajectory and development, identify potentially relevant skills to develop, and develop a lifelong learning disposition". Only by doing so, will we add value to their learning experiences of international businesses.

As a pilot program, we recognized a few shortcomings for future improvements. First, the project focused mainly on providing students opportunities to develop skills needed in international business while reducing the barriers to do so. In future studies, we would like to extend this to learn how awareness of global inequality can assist students with their own struggles of inequality and better examine the influence of the Global Brigades mentorships on their future careers. Second, a disadvantage of using Global Brigade is the fee associated with the service. The required department support or external funding sources for the project could be a challenge for colleges with less financial resources. Last, the project is designed for students based in a higher income country to support businesses located in low-income countries,

therefore, the impact and implications might be different if participating students are based in low-income countries. Future investigation will be necessary to address all those questions to support IB education achieve the goal of diversity, equity, and inclusion for students from all backgrounds.

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