

# International Service-Learning Experiences Improve Student Physical Therapists' Cultural Competence: A Three-Year Study

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## BACKGROUND

One of the American Physical Therapy Association's (APTA) strategies to decrease health disparities for racial and ethnic minorities is to improve physical therapists' cultural competence. The current literature does not clearly demonstrate that international service-learning experiences improve student physical therapists' cultural competence.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to document the effects of a ten-day international didactic/clinical service-learning experience in Costa Rica on physical therapist (PT) students' cultural competence.

## METHODS

*Study design:* Quasi-experimental, nonequivalent pretest-posttest control group design.

## METHODS

*Participants:* 50 Texas State doctor of physical therapy (DPT) students (25 control, 25 experimental). There were 14 (28%) males and 36 (72%) females, and 19 (38%) participants were racial/ethnic minorities. The average age was 27.2 (SD = 5.5) years.

*Instrumentation:* Inventory for Assessing the Process of Cultural Competence Among Healthcare Professionals - Student Version (IAPCC-SV©). *Procedures:* This study was approved by Texas State University's Institutional Review Board #5968. The experimental group was comprised of student physical therapists participating in the service-learning international experience.



## METHODS

The control group was randomly selected from Texas State DPT students not participating in the international experience. Control group subjects were selected from the same cohort as the experimental group subjects. *Data collection:* Participants (control and experimental groups) completed the IAPCC-SV© pre-test. The experimental group participated in a ten-day international service-learning experience and the control group did not. Upon completion of the international service-learning experience, participants (control and experimental groups) completed the IAPCC-SV© post-tests. *Data Analysis:* An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) compared the IAPCC-SV© post-test scores between the experimental (international service-learning experience) and control groups, using the pre-test scores as the covariate.

## RESULTS

The IAPCC-SV© pre-test adjusted mean score was 62.4. There was a significant difference between the post-test adjusted mean score for the control group, 60.9, when compared to the experimental group, 69.3 ( $F_{1,47} = 43.3$ ,  $p < .01$ , *partial eta-squared* = .480).

## DISCUSSION

Short term international service-learning experiences can improve student physical therapists' cultural competence. Improving student physical therapists' cultural competence can improve the quality of care that students deliver to their patients.

## CONCLUSION

International service-learning experiences support the APTA's strategy to decrease health disparities for racial and ethnic minorities by improving student physical therapists' cultural competence.

## FUNDING

This research has been funded by Texas State University's Research Enhancement Program Grant, Study Abroad Grant, Service-Learning Fellows Grant, Wilson Travel Grant, and Texas Research Innovative Program Grant.

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