

# **The Evaluation of LearnServe International**

## **Executive Summary**

**February 2015**  
**Submitted by ICF International**



## 1. Introduction

LearnServe International provides leadership training to high school students with a focus on global awareness and social entrepreneurship. LearnServe's two main programs are currently the Fellows Program and the Abroad Program:

- The Fellows program is a year-long after-school program that brings together students from across the DC metropolitan area and teaches them how to develop a business plan; identify an issue they are passionate about; and design a social project (or venture) for which they may seek to obtain seed funding.
- The Abroad program is an 8-month program that takes students and teachers to developing countries where they meet community leaders and have the opportunity to work on local projects and learn about issues faced by developing countries. Upon return from these international trips, students develop action plans to share their experience with their school community and raise awareness and funds for the project they visited.

The mission of LearnServe International is to spark high school students' passion to make a difference and equip them with the knowledge, tools and relationships to effectively drive local solutions to pressing global problems. In order to achieve this mission, the Abroad Program and the Fellows Program were designed to increase students' global and social awareness; improve their ability to work on multicultural teams; enhance leadership and business skills; improve self-confidence; spark initiative to take social action; and enhance problem solving and critical thinking skills. It is hypothesized that these short-term outcomes will lead to more long-term outcomes whereby students will show continued civic engagement in their schools, colleges and communities and pursue studies or careers in international service, entrepreneurship, and/or social action.

In August 2014, ICF International (ICF)<sup>1</sup> initiated a retrospective study evaluating LearnServe International's two main programs. The purpose of the study is to understand how LearnServe experiences have influenced alumni's educational and professional choices, their level of civic engagement, as well as their propensity to take on leadership roles. The study consisted of a survey of LearnServe alumni and focus groups with alumni, advisors, and parents from both the Fellows program and the Abroad program.

Across these three stakeholder groups (alumni, advisors, and parents), the study addresses the following areas:

- The usefulness of the skills taught by the program including: leadership skills, business planning skills, global awareness, and cross-cultural competencies.
- The use of LearnServe programmatic experiences on alumni's resumes, college applications, scholarship applications, and during job interviews.
- Academic and professional choices alumni have made and to what extent these choices were shaped by their experiences with LearnServe programs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some staff from ICF International have volunteered with LearnServe International by serving on review panels for the Fellows program. In order to prevent conflicts of interest, data security permissions were set up for all project related files on ICF International's shared network drive to ensure that only three members from ICF International's research team could access project information and evaluation data.

- Alumni civic engagement outside of work and study and to what extent LearnServe shaped their participation.
- Follow-up information on the state of alumni's ventures for the Fellows program and action plans made by Abroad program alumni.

## 2. Data Collection Methods and Sample

The research team used both an alumni survey and focus groups to collect information on the influence that LearnServe has had on program participants. **144 alumni surveys were collected from November 25, 2014 to January 7, 2015. An additional 24 LearnServe Advisors provided their feedback through alumni surveys and their comments and suggestions. The overall response rate for the LearnServe alumni survey (27%) is within the average range for online surveys of this type which research shows is typically in the range of 25-40%.** Of the 144 alumni that completed surveys, nearly one-half (49 percent) participated only with the Fellows Program; 27 percent participated only with the Abroad Program while the remaining 24 percent participated with both programs.

The majority of survey respondents participated in one or both LearnServe programs since 2010 and the majority of Abroad alumni had traveled to either Paraguay or Zambia. Survey respondents included mostly high school students (41 percent) or were students still enrolled in college (37 percent) with the average age being 19 years old. Among survey respondents not currently enrolled in high school, 99 percent had graduated from high school. Of the remaining survey respondents that were no longer in high school or enrolled in college (n=20), 95 percent had graduated from college and only one survey respondent indicated that they had not graduated from college or high school.

The majority of survey respondents participated with LearnServe within the past five years. Respondents most often were attending or previously attended a public high school (65 percent) and 19 percent indicated that they received a free or reduced cost lunch while in high school. This is lower than the actual percentage of program participants that received free or reduced cost lunch in more recent years based on program data tracked by LearnServe International.

## 3. Key Findings

This section presents seven key findings and a summary of the evidence for each.

- 1) **Most alumni indicated that LearnServe increased their global and social awareness and their ability to work in multicultural groups.**
  - Across all respondents and for each type of program, alumni reported the highest ratings for survey items related to increased global and social awareness and the ability to work in multi-cultural groups.
  - The highest ratings for individual survey items included the following:
    - I am more conscious of my own perspectives and culture;
    - I want to continue to learn about the world's peoples, cultures, and issues;
    - I have a greater appreciation for diversity and cultural differences;
    - I am able to work on teams with peers from different backgrounds
    - I am more knowledgeable about project planning and execution;
    - I believe helping to improve the community is my responsibility;
    - I believe in my ability to influence social change in my community;

- The lowest rated outcome across all types of respondents and for each type of program included increased engagement in academics.
- The table below depicts the average percentage of alumni that indicated they strongly agreed or agreed with each set of outcomes, overall and broken out separately by program type.

ALUMNI SURVEY SUBSCALES	Average Agreement Rating**			
	Abroad (n=39)	Fellows (n=71)	Both programs (n=34)	Overall (n=144)
Increased global and social awareness and ability to work in multi-cultural groups	92%	84%	90%	86%
Increased empowerment to take action in community	80%	81%	87%	84%
Increased problem solving and critical thinking skills	78%	84%	85%	83%
Increased leadership and business skills	75%	83%	80%	80%
Increased self-confidence	81%	82%	78%	79%
Increased engagement in academics	61%	38%	54%	47%

\*The top three highest ratings are shaded for each column.

\*\* 'Average agreement rating' refers to the average percentage of alumni that either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with survey items for each subscale.

## 2) LearnServe programs influence alumni in different ways.

- Fellows Program alumni reported larger gains with their public speaking skills.
- Alumni from the Abroad Program or who participated in both programs were more likely to indicate that their desire to attend college was influenced by their LearnServe experiences.
- Alumni that participated in both programs reported stronger influences on their critical thinking skills and knowledge of project planning and management.
- Survey results yielded statistical differences in the following areas:
  - The percentage of alumni indicating that LearnServe helped them "believe thinking critically is useful for everyday life." A greater percentage of alumni that participated in both programs strongly agreed with this statement versus alumni that only participated with one program.
  - The percentage of alumni indicating their public speaking skills improved. Larger percentages of alumni from the Fellows Program agreed that their public speaking skills improved, compared to Abroad Program alumni and alumni that participated in both programs.
  - The percentage of alumni indicating that LearnServe helped them "know what steps and materials are needed to complete a project." Alumni that participated in both programs were more likely to agree with this statement compared with alumni that participated in either only the Fellows Program or only the Abroad Program.

- 3) Alumni from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to report that LearnServe increased their self-confidence, made them more focused on academics, and motivated them to attend college.**

  - 96% percent of alumni that received free or reduced cost lunch in high school (compared to 78% of alumni who did not) agreed that LearnServe made them “more self-confident”.
  - 71% of alumni that received free or reduced cost lunch in high school (compared to 43% of alumni who did not) agreed that LearnServe made them more “focused on their academics” – a statistically significant difference.
  - 78% of alumni that received free or reduced cost lunch in high school (compared with 42% that did not) indicated that their desire to attend college was influenced by their LearnServe experiences either “a lot” or “somewhat” – a statistically significant difference.
  
- 4) The high school and college completion rate among alumni survey respondents is noticeably higher than the US national average.**

  - Among survey respondents not currently enrolled in high school, 99 percent had graduated from high school.
  - Of the remaining survey respondents that were no longer in high school or enrolled in college, 95 percent had graduated from college.
  - These findings should be interpreted with some degree of caution since only a small percentage of alumni (n=20) were not currently enrolled in high school or college. Future research should try to replicate these findings with a larger sample of older alumni.
  
- 5) LearnServe participation seems to have an influence on alumni college access and professional opportunities and interests. Alumni often referenced LearnServe on their resumes and college and scholarship applications and reported that they thought this helped them receive scholarships and be accepted into college.**

  - Alumni previously or currently attend top tier schools and the majority of alumni attended private colleges and/or universities.
  - When asked what they previously, currently, or hoped to study in college, the top ten responses fall in line with LearnServe’s curricula, including topics such as international studies, business/finance, and communications.
  - Survey respondents and focus group participants often described how alumni became interested in professions that aligned and were influenced by their LearnServe experiences.
  - Survey respondents often referenced LearnServe on their resumes and college and scholarship applications.
    - 76% mentioned LearnServe on their resume
    - 75% mentioned LearnServe on a college application
    - 80% mentioned or intend to mention LearnServe on a scholarship application
    - Among alumni that cited their LearnServe experiences on applications, over one-half thought it helped them get awarded a scholarship and get accepted into college while smaller percentages were not sure if it helped them or not.
  
- 6) Most LearnServe alumni remain engaged and/or serve as leaders on activities or projects aimed at improving schools and communities.**

  - 62% percent of alumni had participated with activities or projects to improve their schools, communities, or other civic organizations outside of LearnServe
  - Over one-half described that they held a leadership role for these activities.

- 42% percent of alumni had started or initiated activities or projects to improve their schools, communities, or some other civic organization (outside of LearnServe).
- Fellows program alumni were significantly more likely to indicate that they had started/initiated other activities or projects to improve their school, community or some other civic organization compared to Abroad program alumni.
- 27% of alumni indicated they had participated with international study abroad programs or international volunteer organizations since their LearnServe experience, seemingly greater than the national average for US students currently enrolled at institutions of higher education.
- 82% of alumni reported that LearnServe made them “somewhat” or “a lot” more interested in participating with an international study abroad program or international volunteer organizations.
- Significantly more participants that participated in the Abroad program or both programs were more likely to indicate that LearnServe made them more interested in participating with an international study abroad program or international volunteer organization compared to Fellows program alumni.

**7) LearnServe alumni, parents, and advisors provided suggestions for enhancements that could make LearnServe programs have a greater influence on students. Most suggestions included providing additional support to help alumni follow-through on their ventures or action plans.**

- Other suggested program improvements included:
  - Increased communication between LearnServe groups within the same year;
  - Helping students more with the ongoing implementation of their ventures;
  - Requiring students to fundraise at least a portion of their trip expenses;
  - Turning LearnServe into a workable curriculum;
  - Eliminating barriers to participation for lower income students that have transportation issues; and,
  - Creating a more formalized curriculum for Abroad trip leaders.

## **4. Conclusions and Directions for Future Research**

LearnServe programs positively influence alumni in various ways that continue beyond their high school career. Most alumni report that LearnServe improves their ability to work on multi-cultural teams; cross-cultural awareness; empowerment to take action; leadership, entrepreneurial, problem solving, and critical thinking skills; and overall self-confidence.

Other key takeaways and conclusions from the study include the following:

- **The largest gains for both programs included increased global and social awareness and the ability to work in multi-cultural groups.** The lowest rated program outcome was changes in students’ level of academic engagement, which may be a function of program participants feeling as though they were already adequately engaged in school prior to LearnServe. Future program evaluations can further explore this outcome to see if there is any change in students’ level of academic engagement or performance before and after they participate with LearnServe using pre/post-test instruments. This additional research can also help tease out whether most program participants are already high academic achievers.

- **LearnServe programs appear to influence alumni in somewhat different ways.** Fellows program alumni report larger gains with their public speaking skills and initiation of activities to improve schools and communities. Abroad program alumni report larger gains associated with their global and social awareness and ability to work in multi-cultural groups. Alumni from the Abroad program or who participated in both programs were more likely to indicate that their desire to attend college was influenced by their LearnServe experiences. These differences are not surprising given the fact that each program focuses on certain competencies more heavily than others. There also appears to be added benefits of participating in both the Fellows program and the Abroad program. Alumni that participated in both programs report stronger influences on their critical thinking skills and knowledge of project planning and management. LearnServe may consider identifying criteria that would encourage participation in both programs as a targeted intervention.
- **LearnServe programs have a greater influence on participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds for certain outcomes.** Alumni from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to report that LearnServe increased their self-confidence; made them more focused on academics; and motivated them to attend college. These findings suggest that LearnServe should continue their outreach efforts targeting high schools students from lower income families in order to maximize the benefits of their programs on participants. As noted by advisors during focus groups, LearnServe should also continue to work towards eliminating transportation or financial barriers to participation by lower income families.
- **Alumni frequently cite their programmatic experiences on college applications, scholarship applications, and their resumes and report that this helped them receive scholarships and be accepted into college.** However, many alumni that cited their LearnServe experiences on their resume or during job interviews were unsure if this helped them get a job. This finding may be a reflection of most survey respondents still being enrolled in high school or college and who may not yet know what influence it has had on their professional opportunities. Future studies can do additional targeted outreach to identify a greater number of alumni that have already graduated from college to examine their perceptions regarding how LearnServe has influenced their professional opportunities.
- **The college completion rate among all alumni survey respondents is noticeably higher than the US national average with ninety-nine percent of study participants having graduated from high school and ninety-five percent having graduated from college.** Future research can utilize an experimental research design with a control group in order to discern whether the college and high school completion rate is directly impacted by LearnServe participation. The goal of the research would be to unpack the extent to which the higher completion rate is a function of higher achieving students being more apt to participate with LearnServe versus lower achieving students.
- **LearnServe programs are inspiring alumni to take on leadership roles for activities and programs geared towards improving schools and communities.** This finding was especially apparent among alumni that participated in the Fellows program or both programs. The percentage of LearnServe alumni that report being actively engaged in activities to improve their community appears to be greater compared to the average percentage of undergraduate college students and high school students that volunteer in the DC metropolitan region.

- **The proportion of LearnServe alumni that went on to participate in other international study abroad programs is greater than the national average of US students that study abroad.** Abroad alumni show the greatest participation with international study opportunities beyond their LearnServe experiences with many alumni having participated in semesters abroad during college or volunteering for international organizations.
- **Fellows program alumni that participated with LearnServe within the past two years were most likely to identify that their ventures were still up and running.** Overall, approximately 45 percent of all Fellows program alumni indicated that their ventures were either ongoing or had been adapted in some form. Abroad program alumni were less likely to have followed through on actions plans after their trips with only one-quarter indicating that they were able to design and implement an action plan post-trip. Some focus group respondents cited that LearnServe should look into ways it can provide additional support to alumni to help them follow through on their ventures and action plans, and LearnServe should consider ways to enhance the follow up component for both programs.
- **LearnServe should continue to make enhancements to their curricula, outreach, and training to maximize the benefits of their programs.** Program enhancements cited by study participants included creating better communication between LearnServe groups within the same year; requiring students to fundraise at least a portion of their Abroad trip expenses; improving the LearnServe curriculum for students; and, creating a more formalized curriculum for Abroad trip leaders.

This study outlines in what ways and to what extent LearnServe's programs influence alumni as well as ways to maximize program benefits through continued enhancements to curricula, training, and outreach activities with alumni. This study assessed the various influences that LearnServe has on alumni using a retrospective survey with LearnServe alumni and by adding contextually rich information from focus groups. This type of evaluation design is an effective way to explore programmatic outcomes.

The findings from this study regarding the effectiveness of LearnServe in influencing outcomes should be further tested and validated using more intensive types of program evaluations such as experimental designs or quasi-experimental designs where differences between treatment and control groups can be tested. Future research adopting a more rigorous experimental design will clearly illustrate programmatic effects that are generalizable and replicable.