

# **Pedagogies of Engagement: Creating Spaces to Enhance Undergraduate Students' Intercultural Competence Through Community Involvement**

Marianela Rivera  
Florida Gulf Coast University

Marta Ramos  
Florida Gulf Coast University

In an era of interconnections, multiculturalism, and globalization, the development of students' intercultural competence has become fundamental in higher education institutions (Childress, 2010; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Garwe & Thondhlana, 2022; Gregersen-Hermans & Lauridsen, 2021; Pinto, 2018; Zolfaghari et al., 2009). Hence, both curricular and cocurricular spaces and experiences are continually created in order to provide opportunities to develop and enhance students' intercultural competence. Those experiences aim to form global citizens who are capable of effectively interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds and can cultivate an appreciation for diverse ideas and perspectives while developing a greater understanding of their own culture.

Among the numerous multicultural experiences available for higher education students, service-learning initiatives have become increasingly relevant (Caldwell, 2007; Falce-Robinson et al., 2012; Halberstadt et al., 2019; Molderez & Fonseca, 2018; Liu & Lin, 2017). Exposing students to culturally diverse environments through service-learning projects provides them with opportunities for authentic linguistic and cultural interactions that are not feasible in the classroom (Palpacuer Lee & Curran, 2018). Therefore, it is expected that these intentional service initiatives have an effect on student learning. This trend is of particular interest in the foreign language disciplines as language is a vital tool to gain access to other cultures. The Spanish-speaking community is the largest linguistic minority in the United States; hence, numerous Spanish Programs have been at the forefront of this growing wave (Barreneche & Ramos-Flores, 2013). This phenomenological study intends to explore

## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores how undergraduate students, who are learners of Spanish as a foreign language, perceived an experience of service-learning and the impact it had on their intercultural competence. Participants were undergraduate students at a public university in the United States who completed a Hispanic culture course. The course included a service-learning component with members of local Spanish-speaking immigrant communities. Drawing from document analysis and interviews, three main themes emerged: civic engagement, cultural interaction and awareness, and lifelong learning. Beyond an educational and linguistic development opportunity, all participants recognized the positive impact of service-learning on their perception of and relationship with local Spanish-speaking communities, their own civic responsibilities, and the use of Spanish as a bridge to increase their engagement in social advocacy. Besides expanding on the literature available on the interconnection between service-learning and the enhancement of intercultural competence, this study provides information for faculty members interested in developing practical learning opportunities for students as they make decisions related to course content.

how undergraduate students, who are learners of Spanish as a foreign language, perceived an experience of service-learning and the impact it had on their intercultural competence. Although there are several studies on the subject, the majority are centered on undergraduate students' experiences abroad (Brandel, 2016; Covert, 2014; Nickols et al., 2013; Paras & Mitchel, 2017; Wessel, 2007) and on heritage speakers (Belpoliti & Pérez, 2019; MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2016; Salgado-Robles & Lamboy, 2019). This study focuses specifically on a service-learning project developed by undergraduate language learners in local Spanish-speaking immigrant communities.

## **Literature Review**

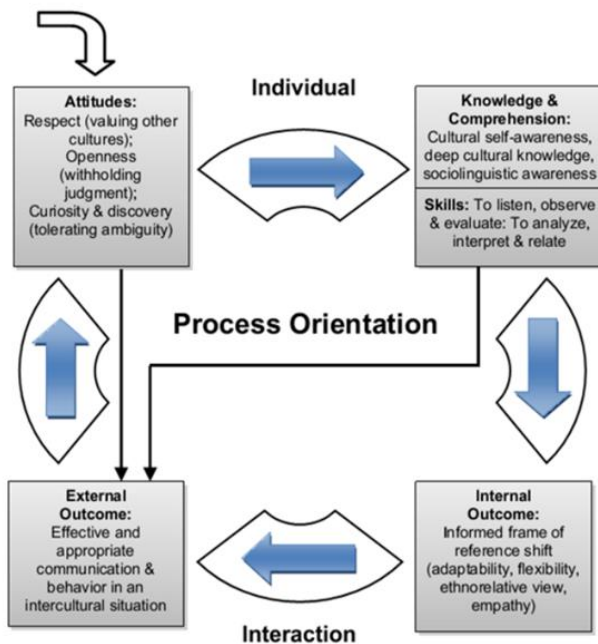
Service-learning plays an important role in higher education institutions and has had its momentum in recent decades (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2021, Salam et al., 2019; Schneider, 2019). Its roots are often attributed to John Dewey (1942), who proposed a committed education, not centered on individualism but on social collaboration. Higher education has inherited that sense of commitment, and it aims to foster in students a sense of responsibility within the community along with professional goals and personal interests (Boyer, 1996). Service-learning has played a crucial role in higher education since the mid-1980s and has since been developed to promote opportunities that benefit both the students and the community (Schneider, 2019). Moreover, this practice is an academic experience that intertwines meeting specific objectives of a course or discipline with developing students' civic responsibility and engagement. Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service-learning as [...] a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Therefore, service-learning experiences transcend mere volunteer work, in which formal assessment of academic learning is not necessarily employed.

## **Theoretical framework**

Providing learning experiences through civic engagement has been an effective method to enhance students' academic and critical skills that they can apply to real-life situations (Adams, 2015). Several studies highlight the impact of service-learning experiences on the development of students' social sensitivity and intercultural competence (Brandell, 2016; Collopy, 2020; Rauschert & Bryam, 2018). Deardoff (2004) defines intercultural competence as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p.194). Highlighting the lack of consensus among scholars regarding intercultural competence, Deardorff (2006) described it in her Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Figure 1) as a complex construct that includes multiple components. Deardoff's (2006) model proposes that the individual's attitudes ignite intercultural competence development. The model also suggests that cultural self-awareness as well as cultural and sociolinguistic knowledge play a crucial role in cultural negotiations. Whether there is an internal outcome or not, the expected external/visible outcome is effective communication in intercultural situations.

**Figure 1**  
*Process Model of Intercultural Competence*



Note. From “Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization” by D. Deardorff, 2006, *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10(3), p. 256. Copyright 2006 by D. Deardorff.

The crucial value of intercultural competence in an interconnected and globalized world has been acknowledged across professional fields. However, intercultural competence is not necessarily easy to develop in a classroom setting; thus, service-learning is an important pedagogical tool that can be used to develop it. Research has demonstrated the impact of service-learning activities on the development of students’ awareness regarding issues related to race, culture, and social justice (Compare & Albanesi, 2023; Wiersma-Mosley & Garrison, 2022) as well as their sensitivity to diversity (Colvin, 2020; Driscoll et al, 1996; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Otten et al., 2022; O’Grady, 2012). Nevertheless; despite the value given to including service-learning activities in the curriculum, more research is needed to provide a clear and relevant connection between service-learning and intercultural competence (Dienhart et al., 2016, Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2020), specifically in courses that not necessarily focus on developing language skills.

### **Service-Learning as a pedagogical tool**

Several studies have confirmed the value of service-learning activities in the development of students’ language skills as they gain confidence and linguistic proficiency (Abbott & Lear, 2010; Baker, 2018; Caldwell, 2007; Ebacher, 2013; Kanost, 2014; Riley & Douglas, 2016; Thompson & Brown, 2019) while assuming an active role in their learning and using the target language in a real-life context. Since service-learning brings people together across differences to address local and global issues (De Leon 2014), many higher education service-learning programs specifically involve minorities and immigrant populations. The presence of numerous local Hispanic

communities throughout the United States has provided higher education institutions with multiple opportunities to develop service-learning projects in which students without the resources to participate in a long-term study abroad program can engage with native speakers and participate in an enriching language and culture learning experience (Barreneche, 2011). This has encouraged higher education institutions to develop service-learning programs within the curricula for undergraduate students who want to enhance their language skills and improve their intercultural competence in connection to the Hispanic community. However, the studies related to service-learning initiatives with the Hispanic community have primarily focused on heritage speakers, the experiences of students enrolled in language courses, and service-learning activities completed abroad.

Service-learning experiences have been proven to be effective language-learning support tools for students at intermediate and advanced levels (Bettencourt, 2015). In a study conducted with students enrolled in a first-semester Spanish course, Bloom (2008) found that students demonstrated progress in their intercultural sensitivity in addition to more interest in learning Spanish. Similarly, in a comparative study between students who completed a conventional Intermediate Spanish course and students who completed a service-learning component in a Hispanic community, Kanost (2014) found that students' confidence in the target language increased; however, she also found that those who did not do the service-learning component expressed more interest in study abroad opportunities. Studies focused on service-learning with students who are heritage speakers of Spanish (MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2016; Martínez, 2010; Pak, 2018; Pascual y Cabo et al., 2017; Pereira, 2015; Petrov, 2013) have underscored the benefits of those experiences not only in the development of the students' language skills but also as an opportunity to serve the community by applying their linguistic skills in specific professional fields. In a study done in New Mexico, for example, MacGregor-Mendoza and Moreno (2016), found that "the amount of knowledge and perspective gained by learners from their involvement was remarkable" (p. 425). Moreover, the results of that study reinforced the value of providing students with opportunities to strengthen connections between the university and the community, specifically through experiences of translation and interpretation related to the medical field. Similarly, Pascual y Cabo et al. (2017) and Pak (2018) found that community engagement led to positive responses from Spanish heritage language learners, as they reported an increase in their linguistic confidence and more interest in participating in meaningful community work. In addition to describing the benefits of including service-learning experiences, other studies have focused on understanding the challenges behind them. Such is the case of a qualitative study done with an upper-level undergraduate Spanish conversation course for non-traditional students (many of whom were heritage speakers of Spanish) by Ignizio (2018). Ignizio (2018) found that even though the service-learning experience was successful, his students faced several challenges given their "substantial lack of free time, economic resources, and transportation" (p. 19), which demanded a "higher level of flexibility on behalf of the faculty and staff at the institution" (p. 19).

Service-learning abroad has also become an emerging area for research, as it combines two forms of experiential education: study abroad and community service (Palpacuer Lee & Curran, 2018). Previous studies (Gaugler & Matheus, 2019;

Martinsen et al., 2010; Menard-Warwick & Palmer, 2012; Walker & Johnson, 2022; Wessel, 2007) demonstrated the value of exposing students to experiences abroad to enhance their academic, professional, and personal development in real-life multicultural environments; however, despite the popularity of those programs, many students still face several obstacles that prevent them from participating in such learning experiences, such as lack of access and/or accommodations to meet particular needs (Soneson & Cordano, 2009), students' socioeconomic status (Di Pietro, 2020; Kubota, 2016; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Wanger et al., 2020), employment responsibilities (Celeste Gaia, 2015; Murray Brux & Fry, 2010; Penn & Tanner, 2009), and inequities in study abroad marketing materials (Boulden, 2022).

The positive role of service-learning activities in expanding students' linguistic and cultural development has been explored from different perspectives. Contrary to other studies, this study focuses on learners of Spanish as a foreign language. The focus of this study is not language; moreover, in this study, language was employed as a scaffolding tool for the development of the students' intercultural competence.

## **Methodology**

This study followed a phenomenological approach as it focused on exploring how undergraduate students who are learning Spanish as a second language perceive a service-learning experience and its impact on their intercultural competence. Phenomenological studies are deeply rooted in a philosophical component (Creswell & Poth, 2018); thus, this study was aligned with a constructivist philosophy, which emphasizes gaining understanding by interpreting undergraduate foreign language students' perception of the impact of a service learning project in a Spanish-speaking community (Creswell & Creswell Báez, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018), in this case, a service-learning project. Our values were important to consider as we move forward with the study; hence, they are explicit in the interpretation of the data. We are experienced professors of Spanish language, literature, and Hispanic culture and identify as part of the Latinx community.

Participants for this study were purposely selected through criterion sampling. A group of 3 undergraduate students, all of them non-native speakers of Spanish, enrolled in a public university in the southeastern region of the United States, agreed to participate in the study. All participants were female undergraduate students in their twenties. Their race or ethnic background was not considered as a sampling criterion. The participants completed a Hispanic culture course that included a service-learning component with local Spanish-speaking immigrant communities. The participants were in their junior or senior year and enrolled in the course as a requirement to complete a minor in Spanish. Since this was a course that was open to all majors, their academic backgrounds or career plans were not considered during the recruitment process. The main goal of the course was to help students gain a deeper understanding of Hispanic immigration in the United States, particularly the role of cinema in the way immigrants' identity is perceived and (re)defined. The course examined the representation of Hispanic immigration to the United States in contemporary films and the portrayal of racial, ethnic, cultural, and social aspects that are part of the integration and/or assimilation process of Hispanic immigrants. In this course, students were exposed to a variety of films (both foreign and American) that shape and are shaped by race, gender,

globalization, discourses of social identity, cultural integration/assimilation, and the idea of “belonging” in national and historical contexts. Initially, the course looked at the United States’ political and cultural relationship with Latin America. As part of the course, participants were required to submit one written proposal for their service-learning project, three journals, and a reflective essay. For each submission, participants were provided with specific instructions that guided them as they worked with the non-profit organization of their choice and with members of local Spanish-speaking immigrant communities. The participants in this study collaborated with a local nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting access to education in underserved communities. The students proposed a work plan in alignment with the organization’s mission to increase awareness of the educational resources available to the community. They also attended various public events where they were able to apply their skills and knowledge while assisting the organization. For instance, at one of the events, the participants provided information about educational opportunities and financial aid resources available for local high school students. At the event, the participants had the opportunity to directly interact with members of the local Spanish-speaking community. Data collection took place through in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Interviews were conducted over a 1-month period; each participant was interviewed once. Interviews took approximately 1 hour per participant and were conducted virtually. Document analysis of 3 journals and a reflective essay that the participants submitted as they participated in the service-learning experience was also crucial. The data collected from these documents was written evidence of the participants’ points of view.

The data analysis process consisted of several steps and analytic strategies. The interviews were carefully transcribed and reviewed along with all other documents collected, including notes taken during the interviews. We used an intercoder agreement to compare the codes of the data and developed a narrative discussion that reveals the essence of the participants’ experience. In this study, three validity checks were implemented: triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. These are strategies that are cost-effective and will verify the accuracy of the findings. Triangulation helped improve the accuracy of the codes as we looked for commonalities across multiple sources of data (interview transcripts, journals, reflective essays). Peer debriefing was done as a third validation strategy. An academic specialist with expertise in qualitative research studies in the field of multicultural education evaluated the quality of the report.

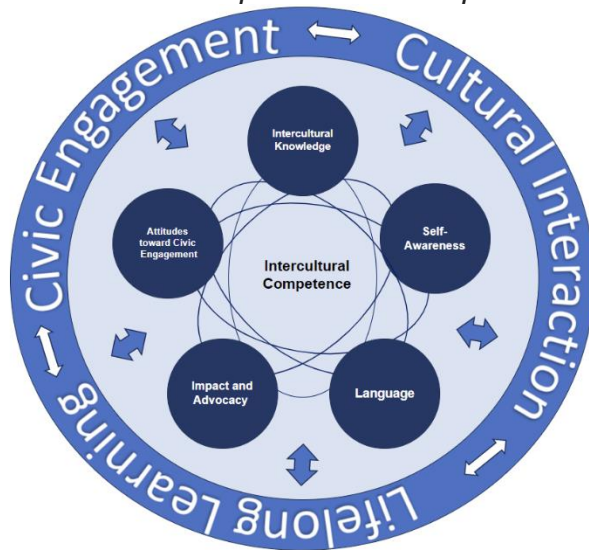
## **Findings and Discussion**

Supported by a theoretical framework that links service-learning to intercultural competence development, this study explored how undergraduate students perceive a service-learning experience with local Spanish-speaking immigrant communities and its impact on their intercultural competence. Three main themes emerged during the data analysis process, which demonstrated the development of the participants’ intercultural competence: civic engagement, cultural interaction, and lifelong learning. Figure 2 shows the themes as well as the subthemes that emerged from the data. The diagram proposes dialogic, circular, and bidirectional connections between the emerging themes and subthemes. In the flowchart, the attitudes and experiences about civic engagement lead the intercultural interaction. While both cultures interact, self-awareness and

language play an important role as tools in cultural negotiation and are likely enhanced in the process as well. An effective intercultural exchange is expected to translate into meaningful and long-lasting learning demonstrated through awareness, empathy, and social action.

**Figure 2**

*Intercultural Competence Development*



### **Civic Engagement**

We found that several factors, such as previous experiences and the environment they were exposed to, provided the participants with a common ground that equipped them for this service-learning experience and shaped their attitudes toward civic engagement. First, the university they attend promotes service, diversity, and community outreach as staples of its mission. Moreover, students enrolled in that institution are expected to complete a certain number of service hours as a graduation requirement; therefore, the participants -who were in the third or fourth year of their undergraduate studies- had previously engaged in service activities. Participants were also undergraduate students minoring in Spanish and had taken both Spanish language and literature courses as well as Hispanic culture courses; thus, they had developed some language skills and cultural knowledge that likely facilitated their interactions as they navigated a different culture. Finally, all the participants were enrolled in a Hispanic culture course in which Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States were the focus of the study. In the course, they read articles, watched movies, and held discussions and reflections about this population. Those experiences very likely provided the participants with linguistic and cultural tools before getting directly involved in the service-learning project with the Spanish-speaking immigrant community, which is predominant in the region.

Civic engagement is highly valued in higher education institutions, which has led to an increase in the development and implementation of initiatives aimed at enhancing students' social responsibility and intercultural competence (Mobley, 2007; Schneider, 2019). Hence, service-learning opportunities and meaningful connections with the community are expected to contribute to developing this competence as well as

awareness regarding race, culture, social justice, and diversity. We found that the participants' attitudes towards both other cultures and service-learning played a vital role in the participants' perceptions and experience through the service-learning project. The participants in this study shared experiences that presumably shaped their attitudes and sensitivity toward this service-learning project. Parting from Dearfford's (2006) model, context and previous experiences are part of the initial level of the development process, which is attitude (valuation and respect for other cultures, receptivity, and curiosity). We found that the context and the experiences described favored cultural interaction and the development of intercultural competence. From the responses provided by the participants and the data collected from their journals and reflective essays, we found a general openness and receptive attitude towards civic engagement and towards the local Spanish-speaking immigrant community. Participants seemed to acknowledge the value of community service.

### **Cultural Interaction**

Direct interaction with other cultures helps increase self-awareness and could lead to a change in perspective (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2021). As they completed the service-learning experience, the participants of this study had the opportunity to be in direct contact with members of the local Spanish-speaking immigrant community. During the interviews and in their reflective essays, all three participants expressed the value of the service-learning project as a critical feature that facilitated cultural interaction and reciprocal learning experiences that could not be replicated in the classroom.

### ***Intercultural Knowledge***

Getting out of their comfort zone and having direct contact with people from the local community was relevant to all of them and positively impacted their learning. Daisy explained that "the setting of service, as opposed to being in the classroom, reading about it, or hearing about it, offers a deeper perspective and forces the students to really learn." However, she highlighted the usefulness of her background knowledge as she prepared to participate in the experience: "My cultural awareness allowed me to go into our service with prior knowledge of issues these families may be facing and how to communicate with them best." Lily recognized the value of the project to get experience in the real world and mentioned that "just getting out of your comfort zone and meeting different people just helps you become more well-rounded." Rose also valued the opportunity to get directly involved with the community and described service-learning as "practicing what you preach" in reference to the institution's mission. She added, "We can talk a lot about service-learning, and we can talk a lot about the community, but actually going out into the community is very important." These interactions provided opportunities for the participants to apply what they had learned in the course and previous courses as part of the language program and to reflect on their identity, their understanding of the local Hispanic community, and their role in society. Daisy emphasized the impact of listening first-hand to the voices and stories of community members and how it encouraged her to reflect on her own responsibilities as a citizen. She said, "I think the service [experience] really helped me gain some more perspectives that I wouldn't have known; I was able to hear their

[members of the Spanish-speaking immigrant community] perspectives on topics such as what it was like for them to come to the US." Daisy added that "it definitely has helped me a lot with my culture [...] It also helped me understand what it means to be American." Furthermore, Rose and Lily reported that, in their exchanges with community members, they were able to see genuine interest from Hispanic parents in educational and development opportunities for their children. Lily explained that doing this service-learning project "helped [her] understand what areas they [Spanish-speaking immigrants] really were concerned with, like education." Rose also noted the value given to education within the Spanish-speaking immigrant community and how formal education is prioritized for young generations. She said, "It was cool to hear about what the kids were doing in high school to get prepared and how excited they were in the accelerated classes they were taking." From the participants' standpoint, this experience helped them better understand the crucial role of education in achieving equitable conditions for the members of the Spanish-speaking immigrant community.

### ***Language***

Even though the course and the project did not necessarily focus on the learning and use of Spanish, language played a central role in the learning experience and the participants' reflection processes. Participants consistently noted the value of having opportunities for direct communication with members of the Hispanic community, both linguistically and personally. From a linguistic point of view, the three participants pointed out the benefits and the difficulties of having to communicate in Spanish. Daisy reported, "When communicating with families who spoke little English, I remembered to be considerate of the language and cultural barrier." She explained that even though having a general knowledge of the language was helpful, understanding other cultural aspects was also important and made the project more cohesive and significant. She said, "Being able to do service-learning with the Hispanic community was so fulfilling. [...] to me, it's not just learning the language; it's learning about the culture, it's learning the history of all aspects of Spanish culture and doing a service-learning project as a Spanish student was supplemental because I was able to bring everything together." Lily articulated her experience as one in which, despite some challenges, she was able to use and improve her language skills: "Sometimes there was a language barrier, sometimes I didn't know the right words to say, but we were in a group so if I couldn't get the message across, someone else could." Lily also mentioned the importance of being exposed to real-life situations as a critical component in her learning process by adding, "I think sometimes, as students of Spanish, we think we are not learning enough, or we are not doing good enough. So, when there is a real-life situation where you can put it to the test, what you have learned, and the actual language itself, it is motivating. [...] I did something that I would not have been able to do if I [had] not learn[ed] this. It helps connect and close the gap." Rose spoke of the value of having some background knowledge of the language and the culture as an effective way to prepare her and her group for the project: "My cultural competence and learning from class, and just being able to apply that when I'm out speaking to people, I think that was really helpful." To this, she added, "I had to use my Spanish while I was working on my service-learning project. [...] We had to use the Spanish that we had learned. The aspect of cultural sensitivity and everything we've learned throughout the course made

it easier to enter the service-learning project.” This underscores the importance of participants receiving formal preparation that emphasizes both language and culture to help them become more responsive and empathetic to linguistically and culturally diverse groups.

### ***Self-Awareness***

The participants had the opportunity to reflect on the impact of the service-learning experience on their own socio-cultural identity, the influence of the environment in which they grew up, and the recognition of differences between their culture and others, as well as their own privilege. Reflections were done in writing; participants submitted journals and a final reflective essay. During the interviews, participants were also provided with the opportunity to discuss the impact the service-learning experience had on them. Their responses suggest that this type of task helped them develop a sense of social and cultural self-awareness and a deeper understanding of themselves and others, specifically in relation to access to education. Daisy expressed the existence of a direct connection between the academic and professional opportunities available to her and her position as an American citizen in contrast to that of many Spanish-speaking immigrants: "I am excited about my future career and opportunities, and now I recognize that part of that is my privilege of growing up American." Lily acknowledged the disadvantages that many Spanish-speaking immigrants face trying to pursue an education in the United States as she stated that "speaking to some of these individuals directly helped me put what I have learned in action and hopefully assist in closing the educational gap for immigrants in the region." Like Daisy, Lily acknowledged her position of privilege regarding access to education: "During this service-learning experience, I recognized the privilege I have had [...], so I can imagine the experience being even more intimidating for immigrants." During her interview, Rose expressed a transformation in her understanding of educational issues affecting the local Spanish-speaking immigrant community: "Before working [on the service-learning project], I knew low literacy rates were an issue, but I did not understand the extent to which it could affect and impact lives." Even though she had some knowledge of the educational challenges faced by the local immigrant community, being in direct contact with the members of that community had a more profound impact on her perception of the relevance of those issues. This experience moved Rose to compare her own background, experiences, and culture with what she observed while completing the project: "It was just completely different; like learning about my own culture and just where I grew up, it was just like two completely separate worlds." This experience prompted participants to pursue a deeper level of reflection on their own positionality and the complexities of the immigration processes, which supports the idea that service-learning experiences directly impact participants' socio-cultural self-awareness.

### ***Lifelong Learning***

#### ***Impact and Advocacy***

Service-learning experiences can contribute to changes in perceptions that may help participants become more culturally aware and increase their engagement in social advocacy (Drewelow & Granja Ibarreche, 2020; Hébert & Hauf, 2015; Mthethwa-Sommers, 2020). The participants in this study revealed that the service-learning project

directly impacted their perspective on the local Spanish-speaking immigrant community and their role in society as agents of change. Even though not every intercultural interaction will result in mutual understanding (Ramirez, 2016) in this case, the participants expressed more interest in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the culture of and building ties to the local Spanish-speaking immigrant community, as well as motivation to continue participating in similar service initiatives in the future. Daisy expressed that the experience “really moved me enough to want to do service” and added that “service-learning really helps us to spark a change within ourselves.” In her final essay, Daisy stated, “With this knowledge, I now understand my civic duty. Everyone deserves the chance at economic and educational opportunity, especially those who go through severe measures to reach new countries.” In a similar manner, Lily mentioned developing a sense of commitment to the community and described her interest in continuing to work with the local Spanish-speaking immigrant community while recognizing the importance of preparing for the experience: “I would like to return in the future with even more preparation and tools to communicate the information.” Rose also expressed her interest in getting more involved with the local community: “I want to get out into the community a little bit more and want to interact with people more [...] it was inspirational.” Moreover, she acknowledged the value of taking steps to become an agent of change by stating that “it showed me how important it is to be an active community member and how important it is to be aware of issues going on in [the local community].”

All three participants expressed, on several occasions, both during the interviews and in writing, their interest in continuing their involvement with the local Hispanic community even after the course had concluded. This aligns with indications of socially responsive development (Altman, 1996; Kayser, 2017), which consists of educating students about current social issues while facilitating first-hand experience opportunities. It can be posited that the participants' direct contact with members of the Spanish-speaking immigrant community helped them awaken an interest in the culture beyond the course content discussed in the classroom.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Limitations of this study emerge from the service-learning experience itself. The service-learning project was a requirement and designed based on the objectives and evaluation methods of a culture course about Hispanic population mobility across international borders. Moreover, students' service-learning experience involved limited exposure to the Hispanic community, which could have constrained the strengthening and further enhancement of intercultural competence and student engagement. These limitations, however, did not prevent us from extrapolating practical implications for the development and implementation of similar projects in higher education institutions. The present study complements existing literature on service-learning practices, particularly research done in connection to foreign languages and culture programs. The findings aim to provide faculty and administrators in higher education institutions with valuable information that could contribute to effective pedagogical strategies to enhance students' intercultural competence. This could lead to more effective and culturally relevant service-learning opportunities within the local community in which everyone could benefit. Service-learning experiences that intentionally aim at creating a connection between undergraduate students and the Hispanic community can be used

as strategies to facilitate the achievement of course-specific learning goals more meaningfully. To expand on the impact of service-learning opportunities on intercultural competence, future research could emphasize the experiences of heritage speakers when exposed to local Hispanic communities and the impact of such exposure on their intercultural competence and sense of civic duty. Future studies could also expand the scope of the service-learning project by including opportunities to explore more specific issues faced by the Hispanic community, such as access to help services, professional/career development opportunities, food insecurity, and acculturation processes. Additionally, more emphasis could be given to deepening effective methods that allow for assessing students' intercultural competence once the service-learning experience is completed.

## **Conclusions**

In this study, we argue that the integration of purposeful service-learning experiences facilitates meaningful learning by providing experiences that cannot be replicated in a traditional classroom setting. Three main themes emerged and proved of great relevance: civic engagement, cultural interaction, and lifelong learning. When service-learning activities are conducted, as in this case, in a Spanish-speaking community, the interaction between the students and the community members fosters the development and expansion of the students' intercultural competence. Research literature has highlighted service-learning projects as one of the multiple experiential-learning practices used in higher education institutions for the development and strengthening of students' intercultural competence. Despite the fact that the information collected in the journals, a reflection essay, and interviews did not encompass every potential component within intercultural competence, the findings support a connection between community engagement and the expansion of intercultural competence. In the case that concerns this study, language played an important role since the interaction was favored by the fact that the participants had an intermediate level of Spanish. Language in this case was part of the cultural knowledge and sociolinguistic skills that facilitated the intercultural exchange. The findings also support that participants perceived the service-learning experience as an effective way to understand and raise awareness of the Spanish-speaking immigrant community's needs and contributions, and a better understanding of their own culture. Based on the participants' responses, we can determine that academic projects that include deliberate interaction with communities that are culturally different can help learners develop intercultural competence while also leading them to develop empathy and a sense of advocacy. Participants demonstrated empathy especially when they acknowledged their own privilege and expressed interest in continuing to engage in service initiatives even after graduation.

## References

- Abbott, A., & Lear, D. (2010). The connections goal area in Spanish community service-learning: Possibilities and limitations. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43(2), 231-245. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2010.01076.x>
- Adams, C. E. (2015). Service-learning projects: What students' reflections reveal. *Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education*, 4(1).
- Altman, I. (1996). Higher education and psychology in the millennium. *American Psychologist*, 51(4), 371-378. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.51.4.371>
- Baker, L. (2018). From learner to teacher assistant: Community-based service-learning in a dual-language classroom. *Foreign Language Annals*, 51(4), 796–815. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12363>
- Barreneche, G. I. (2011). Language learners as teachers: Integrating service learning and the advanced language course. *Hispania*, 94 (1), 103-120. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hpn.2011.a424432>
- Belpoliti, F., & Pérez, M. E. (2019). Service learning in Spanish for the health professions: Heritage language learners' competence in action. *Foreign Language Annals*, 52(3), 529–550. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12413>
- Bettencourt, M. (2015). Supporting student learning outcomes through service learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 48(3), 473–490. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12147>
- Bloom, M. (2008). From the classroom to the community: Building cultural awareness in first semester Spanish. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 21(2), 103-119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310802287442>
- Boulden, K. (2022). Black Student Experiences with Study Abroad Marketing and Recruitment. *Frontiers (Boston, Mass.)*, 34(2), 205–234. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v34i2.524>
- Boyer, Ernest L. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. 49(7), 18-33.
- Brandell, A. (2016). Effects of study abroad and service-learning on intercultural competence. Culminating projects in English, 42. St. Cloud State University.
- Bringle, R.G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1995). A service-learning curriculum for faculty. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 2, 11-122.

Caldwell, W. (2007). Taking Spanish outside the box: A model for integrating service learning into foreign language study. *Foreign Language Annals*, 40(3), 463-471. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2007.tb02870.x>

Celeste Gaia, A. (2015). Short-term faculty-led study abroad programs enhance cultural exchange and self-awareness. *International Education Journal*, 14(1), 21–31.

Collopy, R. M. B.; Tjaden-Glass, S., & McIntosh, N. A. (2020). Attending to conditions that facilitate intercultural competence: a reciprocal service-learning approach. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 26(1), 19–. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mjcsloa.3239521.0026.102>

Colvin, J. W. (2020). Perceptions of service-learning: Experiences in the community. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 8(1).

Compare, C., & Albanesi, C. (2023). Belief, attitude and critical understanding. A systematic review of social justice in Service-Learning experiences. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 33(2), 332–355. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2639>

Covert, H. H. (2014). Stories of personal agency: Undergraduate students' perceptions of developing intercultural competence during a semester abroad in Chile. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(2), 162–179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313497590>

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell Báez, J. (2021). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Sage.

Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies of International Education*, 10(3), 241-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>

Deardorff, D. K., & Arasaratnam-Smith, L. A. (2017). *Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: International Approaches, Assessment and Application*. Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315529257>

De Leon, N. (2014). Developing intercultural competence by participating in intensive intercultural service learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 21(1), 17-30.

Dewey, J. (1942). *Democracy and Education*. Macmillan.

Dienhart, C., Maruyama, G., Snyder, M., Furco, A., McKay, M. S., Hirt, L., & Huesman, R. (2016). The impact of mandatory service on students in service-learning classes. *Journal of Social Psychology, 156*(3), 305–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2015.1111856>

Di Pietro, G. (2020). Changes in socioeconomic inequality in access to study abroad programs: A cross-country analysis. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility, 66*.

Drewelow, I. & Granja Ibarreche, X. (2021). Developing students' solidarity disposition: A case for translation in community-based service-learning. *Foreign Language Annals, 54*(3), 800–822. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12573>

Driscoll, A., Holland, B., Gelmon, S., & Kerrigan, S. (1996). An assessment model for service-learning: Comprehensive case studies of impact on faculty, students, community, and institution. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 3*(1), 66–71.

Ebacher, C. (2013). Taking Spanish into the community: A novice's guide to service learning. *Hispania, 96*(2), 397–408. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23608335>

Falce-Robinson, J. A., & Strother, D. L. (2012). Language proficiency and civic engagement: The incorporation of meaningful service-learning projects in Spanish language courses. *Interdisciplinary Humanities, 29*(3).

Gallini, S. M., & Moely, B. E. (2003). Service learning and engagement, academic challenge, and retention. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 10*(1), 5–14.

Garwe, E. C., & Thondhlana, J. (2022). Making internationalization of higher education a national strategic focus. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education, 14*(1), 521–538. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-09-2020-0323>

Gaugler, K. M., & Matheus, C. C. (2019). Engineering engagement: Perceived L2 development and short-term service learning abroad. *Foreign Language Annals, 52*(2), 314–334. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12393>

Gregersen-Hermans, J., & Lauridsen, K. M. (2021) Higher education internationalisation as a quality driver. In J. Gregersen-Hermans & K. M. Lauridsen (Eds.), *Internationalising programmes in higher education: An educational development perspective* (pp. 11-22). Routledge.

Halberstadt, J., Timm, J.-M., Kraus, S., & Gundolf, K. (2019). Skills and knowledge management in higher education: how service learning can contribute to social entrepreneurial competence development. *Journal of Knowledge Management, 23*(10), 1925–1948. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JKM-12-2018-0744>

Hébert, & Hauf, P. (2015). Student learning through service learning: Effects on academic development, civic responsibility, interpersonal skills and practical skills. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 16(1), 37–49.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787415573357>

Ignizio, G. S. (2018). Advanced Spanish conversation and the non-traditional student: A case study for implementing community-based learning at the urban university. *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education*, 10(2), 12-21.

Kanost, L. (2014). Spanish after service learning: A comparative study. *Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education*, 3, 64-79.

Kayser, C. (2017). Cultivating Community-Responsive future healthcare professionals: Using service-learning in pre-health humanities education. *The Journal of Medical Humanities*, 38(4), 385–395. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-017-9456-2>

Kubota, R. (2016). The social imaginary of study abroad: complexities and contradictions. *Language Learning Journal*, 44(3), 347–357.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2016.1198098>

Liu, R.-L. & Lin, P.-Y. (2017). Changes in multicultural experience: Action research on a service learning curriculum. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 30(3), 239–256.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11213-016-9395-2>

MacGregor-Mendoza, & Moreno, G. (2016). Connecting Spanish heritage language students with the community through service-learning. *Heritage Language Journal*, 13(3), 405–433.

Martínez, G. (2010). Medical Spanish for heritage learners: A prescription to improve the health of Spanish-speaking communities. In S. V. Rivera-Mills & J. A. Trujillo (Eds.), *Building communities and making connections* (pp. 2–15). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Martinsen, R. A., Baker, W., Dewey, D. P., Bown, J., & Johnson, C. (2010). Exploring diverse settings for language acquisition and use: Comparing study abroad, service learning abroad, and foreign language housing. *Applied Language Learning*, 20(1-2), 45-69.

Menard-Warwick, J., & Palmer, D. (2012). Bilingual development in study-abroad journal narratives: Three case studies from a short-term program in Mexico. *Multilingua*, 31(4), 381–412. <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2012-0018>

Mobley, C. (2007). Breaking ground: Engaging undergraduates in social change through service learning. *Teaching Sociology*, 35(2), 125–137.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X0703500202>

Molderez, I. & Fonseca, E. (2018). The efficacy of real-world experiences and service learning for fostering competences for sustainable development in higher education. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 172, 4397–4410. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.04.062>

Murray Brux, J., & Fry, B. (2010). Multicultural students in study abroad: Their interests, their issues, and their constraints. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(5), 508-527. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1028315309342486>

Mthethwa-Sommers, S. (2020). Critical service-learning: Vehicle to social justice education. In *Handbook of Research on Diversity and Social Justice in Higher Education* (pp. 105-116). IGI Global.

Nickols, S. Y., Rothenberg, N. J., Moshi, L., & Tetloff, M. (2013). International service-learning: Students' personal challenges and intercultural competence. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach & Engagement*, 17(4), 97–124.

O'Grady, C. R. (Ed.). (2012). *Integrating service learning and multicultural education in colleges and universities*. Routledge.

Otten, R., Faughnan, M., Flattley, M., & Fleurinor, S. (2022). Integrating equity, diversity, and inclusion into social innovation education: a case study of critical service-learning. *Social Enterprise Journal*, 18(1), 182–200. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-11-2020-0101>

Pak, C. (2018). Linking service-learning with sense of belonging: a culturally relevant pedagogy for heritage students of Spanish. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 17(1), 76–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192716630028>

Palpacuer Lee, C., Curtis, J. H., & Curran, M. E. (2018). Shaping the vision for service-learning in language education. *Foreign Language Annals*, 51(1), 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12329>

Paras, A. & Mitchell, L. (2017). Assessing intercultural competence in experiential learning abroad: Lessons for educators. *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*: 1(8), 45-64. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe/vol1/iss1/8>

Pascual y Cabo, D., Prada, J., & Lowther Pereira, K. (2017). Effects of community service-learning on heritage language learners' attitudes toward their language and culture. *Foreign Language Annals*, 50(1), 71–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12245>

Penn, E. B., & Tanner, J. (2009). Black students and international education: An assessment. *Journal of Black Studies*, 40(2), 266-282. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0021934707311128>

- Pereira, K. L. (2015). Developing critical language awareness via service-learning for Spanish heritage speakers. *Heritage Language Journal*, 12(2), 159-185.
- Petrov, L. A. (2013). A pilot study of service-learning in a Spanish heritage speaker course: Community engagement, identity, and language in the Chicago area. *Hispania*, 96(2), 310–327. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hpn.2013.0033>
- Pinto, S. (2018). Intercultural competence in higher education: academics' perspectives. *On the Horizon*, 26(2), 137–147. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OTH-02-2018-0011>
- Ramirez, E. R. (2016). Impact on Intercultural Competence When Studying Abroad and the Moderating Role of Personality. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 27(2-3), 88–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08975930.2016.1208784>
- Rauschert, P., & Byram, M. (2018) Service learning and intercultural citizenship in foreign-language education, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 48(3), 353-369, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2017.1337722>
- Riley, T., & Douglas, S. R. (2017). The Multicultural Café: Enhancing Authentic Interaction for Adult English Language Learners Through Service Learning. *TESL Canada Journal*, 34(1), 25–50.
- Rodríguez-Izquierdo, R. M. (2020). Service learning and academic commitment in higher education. *Psicodidáctica*, 25(1), 45-51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psicod.2019.09.001>.
- Rodríguez-Izquierdo, R. M. (2021). Does service learning affect the development of intercultural sensitivity? A study comparing students' progress in two different methodologies. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 82, 99–108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.03.005>
- Salam, M., Awang Iskandar, D. N., Ibrahim, D. H. A., & Farooq, M. S. (2019). Service learning in higher education: a systematic literature review. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 20(4), 573–593. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-019-09580-6>
- Salgado-Robles, F., & Lamboy, E. M. (2019). The learning and teaching of Spanish as a heritage language through community service-learning in New York City. *Revista Signos*, 52(101), 1055–1075. <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-09342019000301055>
- Schneider, J. (2019). Teaching in context: Integrating community-based service learning into TESOL education. *TESOL Journal*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.380>
- Soneson, H., & Cordano, R. J. (2009). Universal design and study abroad: (Re-)designing programs for access. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 18, 269–288. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v18i1.266>

Thompson, G. L., & Brown, A. V. (2019). Heritage language learners and Spanish for specific purposes: Bridging the gap through community service learning. *Revista Signos. Estudios de Lingüística*, 52(101). <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-09342019000300908>

Walker, D. L., & Johnson, M. W. (2022). Service-learning abroad: Identity and transformational opportunities for black male student-athletes. In *Historically Underrepresented Faculty and Students in Education Abroad: Wandering Where We Belong* (pp. 191-211). Springer International Publishing.

Wanger, S. P., Breslin, M., Griffiths, F., & Wu, T. (2020). Institutional Barriers to Study Abroad Participation: The Perceptions of Undergraduate African American Students. *International Research and Review*, 10(1), 1-15.

Wessel, N. (2007). Integrating service learning into the study abroad program: U.S. sociology students in Mexico. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(1), 73–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315305283306>

Wiersma-Mosley, J. D., & Garrison, M. E. B. (2022). Developing intercultural competence among students in family science: The importance of service-learning experiences. *Family Relations*, 71(5), 2070–2083. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12766>

### **About the Authors**

Marianela Rivera is currently an assistant professor of Spanish and literature at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers, FL. She holds a Ph.D. in Hispanic Studies from the University of California, Riverside, and is currently pursuing a second doctorate in Education, with a double concentration in Higher Education Leadership and Multicultural/Lingual Education. She has designed and taught a wide range of Spanish courses in universities in the United States, Qatar, and The Netherlands. Her research and teaching interests include Spanish Peninsular literature of XX and XXI, film studies and media, postcolonial studies, and migration studies and cultural clashes with focus on the Middle East, Africa, and Spain. Her research interests encompass Hispanic studies, Afro-Hispanic literature, and the cultural dynamics of immigration and identity in contemporary Spanish cinema. She has also presented her work at national and international conferences. Her recent presentations include topics such as women's voices in revolutionary contexts, Afro-Boricua activism, African migration in Spain, cross-cultural learning in COIL programs, service learning, and the role of digital storytelling in enhancing students' understanding of Latino culture.

Contact: [marrivera@fgcu.edu](mailto:marrivera@fgcu.edu)

Marta Ramos, holds a Doctorate in Education in Spanish from the University of Puerto Rico. She is currently an assistant professor at Florida Gulf Coast University, where she has taught a diverse range of courses spanning language, culture, and literature. Dr. Ramos has a strong academic interest in gender issues within contemporary Hispanic

and Caribbean literature. Throughout her career, she has taken on various leadership roles and is passionate about service and community engagement. Dr. Ramos has successfully integrated service learning into several of her courses, promoting a hands-on approach to education. Additionally, she has co-led multiple study and service abroad programs, further promoting global awareness and cultural understanding among her students.

Contact: [mramos@fgcu.edu](mailto:mramos@fgcu.edu)