ANALYZING IMPACTS OF SHORT-TERM SERVICE LEARNING ABROAD IN BELIZE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to analyze the University of Iowa’s short-term service learning model to consult microenterprises in Southern Belize. It is priority to ensure the UI students in Belize are delivering valuable intellectual capital to the business partners and communities they work in. Mackenzie Phillips traveled to Punta Gorda and San Pedro Columbia in November of 2016 to meet with business owners that previous University of Iowa groups have worked with as consultants. The goal of the trip was to assess the impact of the students serving as consultants in the communities and lives of the Belizean people, evaluate the sustainability of the businesses, and make recommendations on how to improve the program to assure quality deliverance of intellectual capital.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Iowa, John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center sponsors a spring break experiential learning trip to Southern Belize. The 9 days in Belize are designed to immerse students in an international culture to experience business through microenterprise and entrepreneurial lens. The course combines classroom lectures and discussions with approximately 30 hours of on-site consulting with a variety of microenterprises in Punta Gorda and San Pedro, Columbia, located in the Toledo district of Southern Belize. Students are in communication with their business partners and prepare project plans prior to departure. While in country, students work side by side with the business owners and participate in cultural field trips, historic adventures, and homestays to experience the rich Mayan atmosphere and attractions. Over the course of 5 years, the students have worked with 15 different businesses. The study focuses on 6 of the businesses that have been impacted.

METHODS

The researcher spent 8 days in November in Southern Belize conducting qualitative interviews with 7 impacted businesses. Initial conversations began with the history and description of the business model and the challenges of operating in Belize. This led to description of the students’ work and influence on their businesses. Interviews were transcribed and common themes were coded. Each interview lasted between 1 to 2 hours. Themes were verified through conversations with other community and business leaders within the Toledo district. The researcher read and analyzed student perspectives to assist in verifying the qualitative impact.

RESULTS

Below are the brief descriptions and impacts of the 6 of the 7 business owners interviewed.

Radiance Jacobsen, owner of RBJ’s Design
Radiance has been in business for 10 years and sells screen printed apparel and merchandise. When the students met with Radiance they noted that she had an overwhelming amount of inventory, but no inventory system tracking what she had in stock or how much she had invested in her inventory. They provided her with an inventory book and taught her how to track what she has in stock, what she needs to order, and how much monetary value she had invested.

Results
• Inventory and accounting system implemented and continued
• Increased profits due to reduction in inventory

Mayan Craft Ladies
The Mayan Craft Ladies is a business that consists of a mother, three daughters, and one daughter-in-law creating and selling traditional Mayan crafts at Lubuuntun, a traditional Mayan site. Students worked to increase sales by improving communication channels through advertising, historic story telling, and cultural relevance.

Results
• Product Line Expansion
• Increased marketing through signage

Ludwig Palacio, owner of We Art Gallery
We Art Gallery sells local, unique and premium art from artists in the surrounding communities. Ludwig was having difficulty marketing his name and location to tourists and potential customers. The students added We Art Gallery on Google Maps and increased signage.

Results
• Increased tourist traffic and sales
• High reviews on Trip Advisor and Google Maps

Jill Burgess, owner of Driftwood Café and Cultural Art Gallery
Students completed the Principles of Lean Six Sigma to help increase efficiencies at the café and art gallery through sorting, straightening, shining, standardizing, and sustaining.

Results
• 600% increase in art sales
• Standardized restaurant menu which increased guest orders and decreased inventory

Richard and Marciana, owner of Marciana’s Kitchen
Students worked with Marciana’s Kitchen, a local restaurant that sold traditional Belizean dishes to community members and tourists passing through. Prior to arrival of the students, Marciana’s lacked any marketing materials. Students created outdoor signage and a menu that explained the history and cultural relevance to the rich Mayan background.

Results
• Increase in customers and revenue
• Created specific and consistent pricing strategies with implementation of menus

San Pedro Columbia Primary School
Students worked with the San Pedro Columbia local primary school in implementing a sustainable gardening and food program. Many families in Belize struggle with affording and providing lunch for their children. Since a portion of the students could not afford lunches, many students were enrolled in a school program that provided a small lunch, and others simply went hungry. The Iowa students presented a garden plan which included a green house and teaching local children how to grow fruits and vegetables. This has created a healthy and sustainable food program where local students participate in growing and harvesting foods to fill the cafeterias and sell the excess to outside vendors to bring in revenue from the school. The principal from the school stated that the students “set the foundation” of the program by building the irrigation system in the greenhouse. Over the years, this program has consistently been growing and today, they have a handyman who supervises students in growing and harvesting a variety of fruits and vegetables.

Results
• Greenhouse is in full production
• Provides healthy and sustainable food for children

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the impacts of the University of Iowa’s short-term service learning abroad trip to Belize, it can be concluded the program provides valuable intellectual capital to the business owners and communities in Belize. It is recommended that this trip be continued and expanded. Not only did it benefit the businesses and communities in Belize, it had a lasting impact on the student and faculty participants. This service learning model could easily be replicated across other college and universities.