Intercultural learning through intersectoral partnerships: promoting systemic change for poverty reduction – lessons from Chiapas

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Abstract
On March 28, 2007, DePaul University in Chicago promoted a conference on Sustainable Development at the Universidad de la Tierra in Chiapas, Mexico. It was the first time that well-known academics of four Mexican universities (UNICH, UNAM, UNICH and UNITIERRA) collaborated with DePaul University, the largest American Catholic and private institution, to organize a forum where indigenous organizations, Zapatista representatives, radical academics and government affiliated representatives gathered to examine and analyze the concepts and practices of development in Chiapas. Bringing people with divergent (in this case even in conflict) ideologies at the same table represented another attempt to dialogue in the ongoing struggle of Chiapas. The so-called Dialogue of the Cathedral in 1994 between the Zapatista rebels and government officials and mediated by the charismatic and loved leadership of Emeritus Bishop of San Cristobal de Las Casas, Samuel Ruiz Garcias was the first attempt to reconcile opposing views on what constitutes indigenous rights and their demands for autonomy, land, education, health, democracy and a fair and just development (Meyer, Anaya Gallardo, & Rios 2000; Tavanti 2003). The indigenous people, communities, and organizations of Chiapas experienced several unfinished, unfulfilled and frustrating experiences of dialogue since the Zapatista uprising on January 1, 1994. The San Andres Accords in 1996 generated very important reflections on indigenous identities, rights and cultures. Unfortunately, the Zapatista and civil society attempt to elevate these rights to a constitutional recognition were frustrated by an ongoing political struggle in Mexico and by the inability to recognize a common ground between Mexican *mestizos* and the 53 indigenous ethnic groups of Mexico (Bonfil Battalla & Dennis 1996). In spite of these frustrating results, the context of Chiapas, with its complexity of indigenous, Mexican and international organizations (Tavanti 2005), and with the ongoing struggle for land, democratic participation, indigenous rights and neoliberal effects, still represents the best place for studying globalization and development in its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (Olesen 2005).

The topic of "development" at the conference in Chiapas entitled *Desafíos y Incertidumbre del Desarrollo en el Siglo XXI,* generated animated debates on the many experiences of marginalization and imposition linked to neo-imperialist perspectives in globalization (Harvey 2005). Indeed, "development in Chiapas" is a loaded phrase with numerous past and present disappointments on the unfulfilled hopes for poverty alleviation for impoverished and marginalized indigenous communities. Chiapas, a rich land with poor people (Benjamin 1989; Collier & Quaratiello 1998), continues to represent a contradictory reality where the struggle for the recognition of indigenous rights and cultures collide with political-economic and military impositions related to globalism, border issues, and security (Hernandez Castillo 2001). The indigenous people of Chiapas have been scolded with numerous government assistance programs for rural development (Progreso, Procampo, Acerca) that have regrettably been used more as tools for political control rather than true efforts for community

based development (Burbach and Rosset 1994). The conference presentations and open debates touched these arguments and many more issues connected to development. Marina Patricia Jimenez, SPS Chiapas Program Coordinators and well known leaders for the defense of human, indigenous and women rights in Chiapas observed that this conference generated something new:

> *I never saw anything like this in Chiapas. For the first time we were able to put together key academics and activists that usually stand on opposite sites in the ongoing struggle and debates of Chiapas. Yes, with the space we provided and the dialogical approach of this conference, people were able to face the real issues of development, sustainability, identity and rights that are behind the ongoing conflict…. And the presence and sharing of indigenous community representatives, and the DePaul University's students coming from America, Kenya, India and Romania, made of this conference a unique event that positively contributed to the process. I am really proud of DePaul* (Tavanti 2007a).

A DePaul University graduate student summarized the experience this way:

> *The conference was amazing and something all groups involved in should be proud of. I most appreciated hearing from the people in the audience and for having an opportunity for us to speak. The voices of the panelists were important to hear, but for me, the conference really came together when I heard the reactions of those who had been listening all day. I left with one big message that "cultural diversity only happens with those connections" and carry that as a theme from the entire trip* (Tavanti 2007b).

The conference's presentations and follow-up debates addressed more suspiciousness than hope in old and new development strategies generated through public or private interventions. It is understandable that Zapatista sympathizing scholars, activists and leaders would look at development within "dependency theory" frameworks and revolutionary ideals. The strongest message that emerged during the conference was one of social resistance and systemic alternatives such as "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Appia 1992). The issue of collective identities and indigenous rights were central to the debate. They were presented as the departing and essential element for an authentic development that would respond to local community's needs, rather than the plans (and interests) of external agencies. Other perspectives were offered as well. As one of the DePaul student shared at the conference:

> *When I was visiting an NGO here in Chiapas, I saw a poster that was saying "we never crossed the border, the border crossed us." I think that, no matter what we think of development and how much we want to resist it, development will cross us, not matter we want it or not. So the question I ask you: What are you going to do about it?* (Tavanti 2007c).

It is important to remember, especially in this context, that NGOs, students and other organizations are not and should not speak for indigenous communities in times of change. This conference encouraged engagement from each participant's own location and experience of poverty. It is clear from the conversations and statements at the conference that people are ready and willing to work together; however, the tools may not yet be in place for that collaboration to happen. Indigenous communities, NGOs, governments and academic

institutions must be armed with the tools and knowledge so that when they insert themselves into the dialogue, they are well-equipped to deal with the machinations of political, economic and social maneuvering (Hall & Patrinos 2005). This does not require a loss of identity, but rather forces all parties to recognize the different perspectives that must be taken into account to produce results beneficial to all for poverty eradication. Whether within the current system of outside of it, the conference massage was clear: development could signify something to the indigenous and poor people of Chiapas only if it is coming with change. A real change implies a systemic approaches and in considering indigenous people and organizations not only as passive recipients but active identities with their own rights, ways of being and doing things.

The conference also offered a clear invitation to create local, national and international intersectoral partnerships. Local NGOs, in parallel manner as the Zapatista National Army of Liberation (EZLN) in their Other Campaign, perceived the importance of partnerships, collaborations across borders and sectors (Pickard 2007). Partnerships, in the perspectives of Chiapas Zapatista and land movements cannot be reduced to exclusive bi-lateral relations with leftist parties. This explains why the EZLN refused to officially sponsored presidential candidate Lopez Obrador and the agenda of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD). The perspectives, visions, needs expressed by indigenous communities and organizations of Chiapas appear to go beyond a magic political bullet. Various conference participants remarked that a systemic change is necessary. At the end of the day, DePaul University offered a certificate of participation to registered conference participants. Receiving recognition from DePaul University in the United States meant a lot for the indigenous people, Mexican students, and members of the Mexican universities represented. This recognition serves a dual purpose – the recognition of an increase in knowledge and understanding on the part of the conference participants through dialogue about and exploration of these issues with one another and as recognition of people's interest in working together to foster change. Academic institutions can play a variety of roles in promoting systemic change; however, one of the largest roles is that of promoting a framework through which knowledge transfer occurs via dissemination, technical support and lending capacity. In other words, a "lead partner" (Tavanti & Hollinger 2006). The Chiapas study abroad program provides DePaul University the opportunity to serve as a lead partner and foster change through a variety of ways.

The SPS Chiapas Study Abroad

Chiapas, the southernmost and poorest state of Mexico, is an appropriate place for the study of globalization, sustainable development, nongovernmental organizations, resistance movements, indigenous rights and fair trade. DePaul University, particularly through the School of Public Service (SPS), the Study Abroad Program, the Office for International Programs and the Steans Center for Community Based Service Learning have been very supportive of the Chiapas program as they reflect Vincentian concerns for poverty alleviation and the promotion of social justice. Although outside of the mainstream media, Chiapas remains a popular site for students interested in learning about the trends and effects of globalization from above versus globalization from below. The SPS Chiapas program is carefully designed to expose students to the contradictory effects of free trade and present the necessity for true alternatives through a development that is sustainable, fair, just and respectful of cultural and human dignity. It begins with the assumption that system thinking is essential for promoting systemic change. System thinking offers fundamental tools for

analyzing society and interpreting our experience by focusing on the relationships between elements rather than within the content of the elements (O'Connor & McDermott 1997).

The Chiapas exposure challenges students to not make assumptions about the current system while at the same time inviting them to think anew. Rather than only exposing students to alternative ideologies such as those expressed by the utopian realities of Zapatista autonomous community and NGOs clearly motivated by their Zapatista agenda, the preparation readings, program orientations, visit of organizations and activities during the immersion week in Chiapas are carefully designed to demonstrate the complexity of problems but also the variety of possible solutions. Since March 2004, the first year of the SPS Chiapas Program, alumni and coordinators have recognized ten elements that make this program a "best practice" in professional and adult service learning.

1. **CHIAPAS COORDINATORS:** A local coordinator, in dialogue with the instructor, does the coordination and adaptation of the program itinerary, selected organizations and other adjustments. Through this, the "service" emphasis of the program and its relevance for the current context of the Chiapas process is guaranteed. The coordinator, Marina Patricia, does more than "coordinating". She is actually an invaluable presence for her expertise and personal commitment to the work with indigenous people. Her leadership and knowledge blend with the role of the director and instructor of the program, Marco Tavanti, who has been conducting collaborative research projects and leading delegations to Chiapas since 1997.
2. **GLOBAL LEARNING:** Chiapas is a unique place for the study of globalization from above (free trade agreements and development programs such as NAFTA, FTAA, CAFTA, PPP) and globalization from below (Zapatista movement, Mexican and international NGOs, indigenous civil society). In addition, as the southernmost state of Mexico bordering Guatemala, Chiapas also provides an excellent context for understanding border issues, cultural diversity and indigenous rights. As the poorest state in Mexico, Chiapas appeals to DePaul University to continue developing a transformative educational presence in this state. Every year, about four students decide to go back to Chiapas to work as volunteers and interns in local NGOs. Other initiatives organized by the students include inviting a delegation of indigenous women and leaders in the United States for speaking tours and presentations in academic conferences.
3. **INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING:** Due to the professional engagement of the instructor and coordinator, the SPS Chiapas program is all but "cross-cultural tourism." Students get to know organization and encounter situations that they would not be able without the trust and connections of the instructor and coordinator. They acknowledge the privilege of participating in such a unique experience and they reflect and act on their social and professional responsibility to make a difference and to return some of what they received. Instead of "doing something for them," students are required to invest their energies in what is more useful to the process of Chiapas: listening, observing, learning and then action once they go back into the United States.
4. **FACING POVERTY AND SUFFERING:** Although every participant comes to the program with their own unique background and sensitivity to people in poverty, the Chiapas program challenge students to actually see, meet and, even for a short time, experience poverty first-hand. In the 2006 program students spend a night in precarious conditions of two internal displacement camps in the Highlands region. In addition, hearing the testimony of survivors of the December 22, 1997 Acteal

massacre deeply impacts our students. The emotional intensity of these testimonies did not preclude students from recognizing the courage of indigenous people belonging to the Civil Society Las Abejas (Tavanti 2003).

5. **BEYOND BORDERS:** Latino and Chicano students in particular, recognize how the struggle for the recognition and rights of indigenous communities in Chiapas is not so different from the struggle of Latino immigrants in the United States. The program helps participants go beyond Cancun and stereotypes of Mexicans; rather, it helps them recognize the ethnic diversity and indigenous dignity of Mexicans and Central America. In addition, immigration is viewed not only as a pull factor to the American dream, but as a push factor for economic instability, lack of opportunities, violence and discrimination, particularly visible in the Southern border of Mexico.
6. **NGO VISITS AND PANELS:** The program offers students the opportunity to visit several NGOs in their work places. It also promotes dialogue among NGOs, who were, until recently, more focused and isolated in their own projects. It also fosters professional dialogue between Chiapas NGO leaders and our NGO/Nonprofit professional students. Through these panels, the SPS Chiapas Program encourages Chiapas-based NGO representatives to listen to each other experiences, sharing best practices and foster more inter-organizational collaborations. What distinguishes this program from other Chiapas delegations is that Chiapas NGO professionals get to engage in a dialogue with our students, professional managers in nonprofit organizations in the United States and other countries.
7. **ORGANIZATIONAL MISSIONS:** The Program benefits from the support of the Vincentian mission of DePaul University. Because of its Vincentian and Catholic dimensions, the University is support the program in its academic quality and self-sustainability. It encourages the relation with the San Cristobal de Las Casas Diocese and with other religious based organizations working in line with the evangelical and Vincentian option of the poor. In addition to the historically affirmed presence of Jesuits and Dominicans in Chiapas, the connection with the Vincentian family is represented by the work of the Daughters of Charity with their San Carlos Hospital in Ocosingo, in the Lacandon Forest of Chiapas. Their service to the indigenous poor, also members or sympathizers of the EZLN made them a target in the counterinsurgency operations following the 1994 uprising.
8. **INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS:** The program has established good collaborations with academic institutions. This generated the organization of an annual conference that includes the participation of university scholars and administrators that would be otherwise insolated and in competition. During the 2007 conference on development at the Universidad de la Tierra, about 200 participants received a certificate from DePaul University. The partnerships and collaborative relations are purposely maintained with very diverse institutions that reflects diverse political perspectives. The ultimate objective in promoting institutional relations is to highlight the values of participating institutions while promoting programs and initiatives empowering local, indigenous and impoverished communities of Chiapas.
9. **HOLISTIC EDUCATION:** Contrary to other programs in Chiapas, our academic program offers students the opportunity to taste the complexity of Chiapas. Rather than looking at one side, the program attempts to offer an education to the complex intersection between sectors, political positions and organizational constituencies across conflicting sides. This best practice could not be possible without the active collaboration of students in their preparatory readings.
10. **UNIQUE EXPERIENCE:** Even though the experience of previous participants is incorporated into the program, each year the trip to Chiapas has unique features and

experiences. In addition to the improvements made in logistics and the learning experiences, each program is purposely designed to have something different that can make alumni of the program foster collaborative group dynamics based on the sharing of unique experiences as opposed to seniority. Yearly experiences, organizations, and itinerary require more work from the part of the coordinators, but it has the advantage of keeping up with the constantly changing organizational landscapes of Chiapas.

The student perspective has also promoted some best practices in regards to the experience of the Chiapas program. The success and popularity of the program is due in large part to the enthusiasm and commitment of retuning students who describe the Chiapas program "a life changing experience." What often emerges in the students' feedback and program evaluations is how the Chiapas Program helped them to open their eyes, challenge their personal convictions and redirect their studies and career paths.

1. **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:** While students are encouraged to come to the Chiapas experience from their own unique perspectives, teamwork and engagement with others on the trip and in the communities is a critical component. Students work in teams of two and are assigned different areas of "work" for the trip including note-taking, gathering contacts and photography. By assigning responsibility, it makes the students more engaged and accountable to not only the people we meet with, but also to the Chiapas experience as a whole.
2. **READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS:** The readings and assignments, as noted above, not only serve to ground students in the history of the region, but also serve to actively engage the participants in reflection of the challenges facing the communities and the variety of solutions available. Students are encouraged to share information gathered and to ask questions regarding the readings, films and research conducted before, during and after the trip to Chiapas.
3. **FOLLOW-UP WORK:** Participants recognize that their work does not end upon their return to the United States. In most cases, the experience of Chiapas affects students' coursework and engagement with Latino and Chicano populations in our own communities. In the past, students have developed websites and written articles to communicate and share their experiences, held fundraisers to benefit communities visited in Chiapas, and some have even returned to the region to continue their personal work and foster partnerships.
4. **RISK-TAKING AND INNOVATIVE:** The Chiapas program takes the students from the classroom to a real world experience. The people in books come to life and a bridge is built both literally and figuratively from Chicago to Chiapas via this program. Every educational experience should have the potential to be blessed with the opportunity to do something different that takes participants outside their comfort zone and forces them to re-think the ways in which they dialogue with others. A program like this one is risky. It is risky for the communities and organizations that open their doors and hearts; it is risky for the students embarking on this journey; it is risky for the faculty and organizers who attempt (and succeed) in creating a comprehensive experience; and, it is risky for the University to move beyond its immediate concerns of time, space and money and into the global community.
5. **DIVERSITY:** This program is not about exposing one side to the other, it is about a sharing of history, ideas, and experiences. The program does not strive to offer students a one-sided view of events that occur in the region. The makeup of the syllabus means that we visit Zincantan, Oventic, Acteal, Palenque, different organizations who specialize in everything from health care to women's issues.

Participants in the program not only get to visit, but are given the opportunity to ask questions related to what we are most interested in – that in and of itself is encouraged, fostered and permits the diversity of opinions and experience to shine through.

6. **VINCENTIAN IDEALS:** Individuals, groups, departments, institutions, communities, cities and societies have a social responsibility in achieving this goal of poverty reduction. All of us have the capacity to be values-driven; connected to our communities – DePaul, our neighborhoods, our city of Chicago; supportive of diversity; risk taking; innovative; and pragmatic. These six elements are just the basics and can lead us down a path of compassion and understanding in the work we do, the ways in which we approach one another and how we communicate with those living abroad.

The study abroad program to Chiapas, Mexico is not just an opportunity to take a trip across a border; rather, the trip serves to influence the individuals through the relationships and connections made on academic, emotional, personal and professional levels. Students are engaged in a continued process of transformation because of the experiences in Chiapas – from encountering language and cultural barriers, dealing with personal beliefs and assumptions about life in Chiapas as well as the challenges each student presented to one another in the sharing of interpretations of events. The Chiapas Program touches students deeply and provokes participants to rethink assumptions. It shocks personal and professional foundations, forcing students to rethink careers and personal engagement in society. In this vein, it requires repositioning ourselves and our ways of thinking in regards to the work we do and the ways in which we study and dialogue with others in our University, city and global communities.

The Vincentian Paradigm, DePaul University and the SPS Chiapas Study Abroad Program

DePaul University is the only academic institution that has two academic programs in Chiapas: one in the School of Public Service and one in the Law School. Soon there will be a third with the addition of an undergraduate program focused on the study of border issues through international experiential service learning. Dr. Tavanti, the SPS Chiapas Program Director, had a similar Chiapas program at Loyola University in Chicago; yet, only DePaul University administrators took the initiative (and risk) to ask him to make his program an academic program and a core course in the International Public Service Master of Science Degree. Saint Vincent de Paul's dedication to poverty reduction and systemic change is central to DePaul University's educational mission. Because of the engagement of students, faculty and administrators in the realization of that mission, DePaul University is a unique place where academic and social entrepreneurship is encouraged and rewarded. The Vincentian mission of doing good and doing it well and of inventing new ways to serve society and the poor is the greatest asset of the university. Saint Vincent de Paul serves as a reminder to all DePaul students that education expands beyond the walls of the classroom and into the communities where students live, work and travel. The indigenous people, nongovernmental organizations and academic institutions in Chiapas benefit from the presence and service of DePaul University's programs because of its mission and its people.

Vincentian charisma and values are often associated with "charity." Yet, Vincent de Paul and his successor were dedicated to not only give "assistance" to the neediest. They were also concerned with finding efficient and systematic solution to the growing numbers of orphans, widows, homeless and disable people, prisoners, migrants and foreigners (Pujo 2005). The human and global needs of people in poverty in the 21st century are not that different from

Vincent's times. The political turbulence, economic upheaval, religious controversy, and devastating wars plaguing France in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries echo the frustrated democracy, growing inequalities, religious struggles and systematic violence occurring in Chiapas today. The scale and complexity of poverty in Chiapas, and in many other regions that struggle within global contexts require more than just philanthropy and charity. It requires a "new international deal" for ending poverty through systemic change and intersectoral partnerships fostering sustainable development (Cnaan, Winneburg and Boddie 1999). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent a blueprint that Chiapas could follow if only the Mexican and its partnering governments develop a serious commitment to it (Hall & Patrinos 2005).

Adult Education for Systemic Change

The MDGs promote comprehensive and holistic change. Systemic change is the essential process for addressing the root causes of poverty. It is a creative process recognizing the interconnectedness of all parts of a system and, in turn, transforms that system at a deep and lasting level. Education is the key for making this transformation happen. Although most research has been directed toward the systemic change of educational systems, little has been devoted to the primary responsibility education has in developing leaders, professionals, and responsible agents for sustainable development, organizational development and social change (Scott & Gough 2004). In the current global economy, technical training often served as the necessary connecting link between "traditional" education and effectiveness in the workplace. Yet, adult education is much more than "training" to technical skills. Addressing the real roots of global problems, such as world poverty, requires the education of skilled leaders capable of critical thinking and social analysis in diverse workplaces and intercultural societies. Skilled professionals alone will not be able to recognize the structural problems in the current unequal distribution of societal, political, economic and technological powers. They will ultimately contribute only to perpetuate or reinforce the current dysfunctional dynamics of globalization and its discontents (Stiglitz 2004; Stiglitz 2006).

Effective adult education for system change emerges from the Paulo Freire's innovative insights for pedagogy of liberation and on Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the intersection of culture with politico-economic systems (Mayo 1999). Moving from maintaining the *status quo* to the emergence of new infrastructure and the predominance of a new system, requires pedagogical steps raising awareness, exploration of news paradigms and attempts in adapting them into specific contexts (Checkland 1981). The formation of personal and professional values, along with a shared vision for a better world, and a capacity to build networks and collaborative environments are among the essential ingredients that adult education for systemic change need to include in their pedagogical programs. The Vincentian values in higher education – values-driven, connected to the community, supportive of diversity, risk taking, innovative, and pragmatic – suggest that the moral and experiential components for poverty alleviation are what (should) drive adult and professional education oriented toward systemic change. Adult education needs to focus on programs and pedagogies designed to expose students to the local and global realities of poverty and poverty reduction. Too often, the pragmatic values embedded in the American culture and education make adult students move from problems to solutions without sufficiently stressing the analysis of the systemic and root causes of the problems (Mayo 1999).

Socially Responsible International and Professional Learning

The SPS Chiapas Program is probably one of the most useful experiences for adults who want to learn about international issues while serving other people's needs. The Vincentian values in higher education challenge us go beyond educating leaders that do 'good' in society. Vincentian higher education must be concerned to educate socially responsible leaders striving not only to "volunteer" or give back to community, as in the classic meaning of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Laszlo 2003). The ultimate and most effective Vincentian adult and professional education should be one that combines professional skills and career with systemic change and values. The business of Vincentian adult education is developing and sustaining lasting values in future and current leaders. The objective is obtainable conditionally to administrator, faculty, staff, students and alumni's commitment to "be the change they want to see in the world" both personally and organizationally. Socially responsible higher education is therefore about educating global citizens who recognize the interconnection between local and global contexts.

While visiting the Zapatista Caracol of Roberto Barrios in March 2004, DePaul University students learned something very important. As we were waiting for the security guards and the Junta de Buen Gobierno to receive us, we noticed how our letters of presentations were all well organized in a folder. While a few students were intimidated by their ski masks and initial diffidence, they were also very surprised of the friendly and honorific reception we receive at the end of our meeting. As masked man and women representatives of the Junta were expressing the growing poverty levels in their communities and the reasons of their Zapatista resistance, they asked us "not to leave them alone." From their simple and clear words, students realized of their own international social responsibility in sharing what they have heard and observed in Chiapas. They realized that their best way to "help" the poor of Chiapas was to commit to a socially responsible personal and professional life as global citizens back in Chicago. They discovered something similar to what five century before Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, the notorious defender of the "indios" and the first Bishop of Chiapas, realized: that to defend the rights of indigenous people in the New World, his main work was back in his motherland Spain (Casas & Varela 1999). Fray Bartolomé stayed in Chiapas only about six months; our students only about ten days, but we all realize how political and economic decisions in the United States affect the life of indigenous people in Chiapas.

International service learning for adult and professional students must go beyond "doing something for the poor" and realize the social responsibility for investing knowledge for the common good. Realizing international social injustices, one of the learning goals of the SPS Chiapas Program, should orient participants to become conscious that reducing poverty can be achieved only through a comprehensive strategy for achieving financial sustainability, increasing organizational capacity and social development and promoting-monitoring good governance (Lustig and Deutsch 1998). The Vincentian values of our higher education institutions invites us to focus on a fourth dimension in poverty reduction: the faith-based view that we a moral responsibility to end poverty, promote justice and respect human dignity. The example of Saint Vincent de Paul, who, in-spite his dedicated support to foreign missions, invested almost all his life in Paris and France, reminds us of the importance of "thinking globally and acting locally." And even more, the rapid and intense interconnections of our flattening word suggest that international and professional service learning programs should invite participants think and act glocally. Chicago is the hub for numerous NGOs working in solidarity with Chiapas. The success of a program is measured also by alumni engagement in organizations and issues related to the socio-economic, political and identity

struggles represented by Chiapas indigenous organizations in resistance. The SPS Chiapas Program alumni have created organizations such as ChiapanECHO and solidarity initiatives like the Another World is Possible Conference that express their learning on the importance of building relations of reciprocity and raising consciousness of global interdependency.

Often professionals join the School of Public Service with the primary objective of obtaining a Master degree and advancing their career. They often do not think that a program would actually make them change entirely their perspectives on the meaning of learning (Cross 1981). The Chiapas experience makes them rethink the opportunities and responsibilities that come with their education, expertise and leadership as professionals. They rediscover the importance of applying theory and analyzing reality of socially complex context and organizations for the goal of making this world a better place (Usher, Bryant & Johnston 1997). The personal and professional leadership examples like Marina Patricia Jimenez and several other indigenous, Mexican and international leaders, makes them realize that a life entirely dedicated to the cause of the poor is not only an alternative lifestyle, it can also become their professional career as well.

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