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**IMPROVING PRE-DEPARTURE TRAINING FOR ENGLISH TEACHER
VOLUNTEERS IN COSTA RICA: AN EXAMINATION OF ALIARSE AND
RECOMMENDATIONS**

Derek Joseph Schwartz

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Sustainable
Development as SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

May 10, 2021

Advisor: Dr. Aly Dagang, SDLR Program Chair

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ABSTRACT

Volunteering outside of one's country and culture is a challenging endeavor. While abroad, international volunteers generally encounter a new language, culture, and lifestyle which can create challenges for volunteers. Pre-departure training can buffer and lend nuance to the difficulties that volunteers face. In Costa Rica, the organization Aliarse manages a volunteer project that experiences high volunteer attrition and incorporates minimal pre-departure training. This case study draws on quantitative and qualitative data collected from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews of former Aliarse volunteers over two months. Results from the data found that ninety-four percent of the interviewees said interacting either directly or indirectly with current and former teachers prior to their departure could have helped them set appropriate expectations or have more realistic expectations. Eighty-eight percent of interviewees identified "how to adapt to the culture" as an important pre-departure training topic, which recognizes the need for greater resources and support on cultural adaptation. One conclusion that can be drawn from the volunteer findings is that having access to information on Costa Rican culture, schools, and conditions through a pre-departure training portal would have helped volunteers during the transition to their new environment. Based on the findings, this research proposes that a pre-departure training portal could decrease attrition and facilitate a smoother transition into a volunteer's new environment.

Introduction

In the early 1950's, the concept of international development as it is known today sought to transform livelihoods and conditions for the 'underdeveloped' in the Global South (Rist, 2014). Thirty years later, during the decade of the 1980's, the General Assembly of the United Nations sought to revitalize development "via the new Western fashion of ecology" in an attempt to shift the discourse and gain the support of international public opinion (Rist, 2014, p. 178). Out of this was born the concept of *sustainable development*, a paradigm of development that takes into account the environmental and ecological consequences of human livelihood transformation. In 1987, the UN Commission on Environment and Development, in *Our Common Future*, defined sustainable development as "the ability to ensure that development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 16).

Over the last thirty-five years, there have been a variety of new definitions and understandings of what sustainable development is, as well as changes in the execution of sustainable development. The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), created in 2000 and focused primarily on human development, largely excluded environmental concerns in the vast majority of its projections. In 2015, with the culmination of the MDGs, the UN recognized the relative absence of the environmental imperative in the work of the MDGs as well as the imperiled status of global natural resources and created the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs took on sustainable development comprehensively, weaving sustainable development into the mandates of the seventeen goals, and recognizing and embedding the integrality of sustainability into the work of the UN. This transformation also occurred in response to criticisms of the MDGs from the international community as well as through

increased participation from stakeholders in decision-making processes (Klein, 2014; Carant, 2017).

Our Common Future offers a vast and broad definition of sustainable development capturing the enormity and breadth of the field. Today, the conceptualization of sustainable development is framed by three pillars from which sustainable development can be measured; they include people, profit, and planet (Gallagher et. al. 2018). Sustainable development everywhere is intertwined into the food one eats, the schools one attends, the materials used to build one's house, one's income, the language(s) one speaks, the amount of water one uses, the amount of waste they produce, and the management styles of businesses and organizations (Caradonna, 2014; Gallagher et. al. 2018). Sustainable development is also interwoven into governmental programs and discourse.

In Costa Rica, sustainable development is a widely used term and a frequent topic of conversation. In recognition of their environmental accomplishments, Costa Rica has won the 2019 Champions of the Earth award, which is the United Nations' highest environmental honor (Feoli, 2020). There were many contributing factors to Costa Rica earning this award, one of which was there widespread use of renewable sources. Ninety-eight percent of the energy generated in Costa Rica is from renewable sources and in the last thirty years more than thirty percent of the country's forest cover has been recovered (Feoli, 2020). Costa Rica is progressing to become carbon neutral by 2021 and they are also working toward banning single-use plastics (Feoli, 2020). In terms of the other two pillars of sustainable development, people and profit, Costa Rica has several initiatives to increase employment, create improvements in profitability, and in the long term, improve social well-being and quality of life (CINDE, 2019). These

sustainable development efforts are interconnected across the tourism, agricultural, manufacturing, and supermarket industries in order to be impactful and successful (Feoli, 2020).

Costa Rica has worked to make tourism more sustainable through its Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) that began in 1997 in response to environmental problems with the sudden increase in tourism. In the manufacturing sector, Costa Rica has been able to shift its principal exports from primary products to high-tech manufacturing and services by taking targeted actions to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (Botella-Rodríguez, 2018). One of these targeted actions was in the 1990s when the Costa Rican government partnered with the Costa Rican Investment Promotion Agency (CINDE), a private, non-profit promotion center. Being able to attract new types of FDI is important as it has provided and continues to provide Costa Rica the ability to diversify its economy, promote higher and more technical educational programs, and provide high-paying jobs for its citizens (Nelson R. C., 2009). In addition to economic changes, the increase in FDI has also caused a shift in internal migration patterns.

In 2011, of seventy-four FDI investment projects in Costa Rica, sixty-four were based in urban areas generating a consequent increase in rural-to-urban migration (OECD, 2012). The consistent increase in FDI in urban areas has boosted the need for Costa Rican English speakers to work in call centers, manufacturing centers and other new industries (Paus, 2005). This, along with other parts of Costa Rica's sustainable development strategy, has contributed to the design of certain initiatives, one of which is *Alianza para el Bilinguismo* (ABI) (The Alliance for Bilingualism).

ABI is an initiative and partnership created by the Costa Rican Investment Promotion Agency (CINDE), the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MTSS), Aliarse, an organization that promotes private-public alliances and the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) (CINDE,

2019). Through ABI, students are given the opportunity to attend CINDE's job fairs; practice building resumes and job interviews; learn about financial literacy; increase their self-esteem; increase their soft skills; and enroll in English courses taught by fluent English-speaking Costa Ricans and native English speakers (CINDE, 2019). During the program, the government provides support and training for participants for twelve to eighteen months, after which they are expected to find employment or attend university. The program goal is for participants to achieve financial independence (CINDE, 2019). In order to achieve this, ABI needed an organization to manage the teaching portion of the program.

Aliarse is a non-governmental organization that is focused on public-private alliances and partnerships for environmental conservation, health, education and local development (Aliarse, 2018). Their mission is "to maximize the impact of the different structures of public-private cooperation for sustainable development" with the strategic goal of promoting an increase in "public-private participation in the management of sustainable development, by advocating public policy, capacity building for the management of public-private partnerships for development (PPPDs) and public-private associations (PPAs), and ensuring the sustainability and scalability of the partnerships it manages" (Aliarse, 2018). Their involvement occurs in the form of research, training and consulting, projects and promotions of PPPDs and PPAs (Aliarse, 2018). In 2018, Aliarse joined ABI and was tasked with opening and managing a "one-year English language teaching program for more than 1,000 young people and young adults, 800 of them living in 15 communities outside of the Greater Metropolitan Area" (CINDE, 2018). In order to accomplish this, Aliarse created a program called Skills for Life (Skills 4 Life, n.d.).

In September of 2018, Aliarse and ABI opened one location with three native-English speaking volunteer teachers. By March of 2019 the program had expanded to two sub-programs:

Skills for Life – Adults and Skills for Life – High School. The adult program was staffed almost entirely by international volunteer teachers, while the High School program was staffed entirely by Costa Rican English teachers. Skills for Life -Adults had grown from one location with three teachers to twelve locations with a total of twenty teachers. Volunteers originated from native-English speaking countries, had certifications to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) and committed to a four-month teaching contract in exchange for housing and meals with a local host family (Skills 4 Life, n.d.)

Initiatives like ABI have had a hand in increasing the need for native English speakers. Increases in tourism have also contributed towards the need for Costa Rican English speakers (Christian, 2013). Popular discourse regarding English language acquisition in Costa Rica is that it can increase the country's competitive advantage and augment incomes for low-wage sectors of the population, especially when taught by a native speaker. This has contributed to the demand for native English-speaking volunteers to teach English in Costa Rica (Jakubiak, 2020).

Costa Rica is home to a variety of volunteer opportunities, one of which is teaching English (Baecher & Chung, 2020). Volunteer English teaching opportunities generally require a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) certificate or the equivalent, which can be earned in as little as one month either online or in a variety of countries. Within the international English teaching community there is much debate around whether or not this is a sufficient amount of training in order to effectively teach in a classroom environment (Ellis, 2016).

Though international English teacher volunteers can be found all over Costa Rica, they do not all have smooth transitions from their home country to their teaching site, which can create a significant barrier to student success and worthwhile volunteer experiences (Furnham &

Bochner, 1987; Skoglund, 2006; Black & Gregersen, 1999). To understand the drivers of this situation, it is necessary to clarify how organizations in Costa Rica who support English teacher volunteers can provide effective pre-departure training in order to facilitate a smoother transition into the new environments volunteers encounter. Also, it is important to decipher how pre-departure training can effectively bridge the gap between pre-departure training and in-country training. These questions need to be answered so that organizations can provide the smooth transitions for international volunteers as they enter their new environment.

Research Question

How can Aliarse improve their pre-departure training for international volunteers in order to facilitate a smoother transition into the volunteers' new environment?

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to provide data-driven information to Aliarse regarding effective pre-departure trainings to improve their volunteers' transitions into their new environments. However, this research could have broader impacts for volunteer programs in general whether they be national, international, short-or long-term, through a third-party company or directly with an organization.

The volunteer industry has the opportunity to be impactful, but it is often hindered by attrition (Milbourn, Black, & Bachanan, 2019). This research could impact the pre-departure training and materials that organizations provide to incoming volunteers, as well as their orientation and volunteer retention processes. For a volunteer, experiencing a smoother transition to a new environment has the potential to decrease volunteer attrition, improve volunteer teacher satisfaction with the program, and improve teacher mental health by preparing volunteers to better manage and navigate the transition to their new environment. For recruiters, a decrease in attrition could mean less rushed, emergency recruiting. It could also give the recruiter more

confidence in the program's ability to prepare, support and retain volunteers. For program managers, this could result in more confidence in incoming volunteers, and better cohesion between volunteers and placement sites. It could also result in a decrease in emergency or last-minute situations that occur when a volunteer quits the program early. In the long-term, these impacts could create positive direct changes in the classroom and community such as improved learning environments, student learning, and student attrition.

Literature Review

Volunteering is defined as “undertaking work for altruistic reasons” (Yea, Luh Sin , & Griffiths, 2018 , p. 111). In the 19th century, domestic volunteer work became institutionalized in the United States as organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and Salvation Army formed. In the 20th century, there was a significant expansion in the number of volunteer organizations, as well as the number of volunteer programs overall in the United States (Duguid, Mündel, & Schugurensky, 2013). Domestic volunteer work in the U.S. occurs in a variety of environments such as social movements, grassroots organizations, faith-based organizations, sports clubs, participatory democracy processes, neighborhood groups, community groups, formal institutions and other places within the non-profit sector, public sector and community organizations (Duguid, Mündel, & Schugurensky, 2013). Volunteer programs also come in the form of gap year programs for recent secondary and tertiary graduates, as well as long-term international volunteer programs such as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps (O'Shea, 2011).

International volunteering is defined as “an organized period of engagement and contribution to society by volunteers, who work across an international border in another country

or countries” (Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008, p. 397). Rooted in missionary work, international volunteerism has grown to encompass a range of actors, stakeholders and sectors, in both corporate and non-governmental organizations (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2010).

Volunteering has been the framework of a boundless exchange of information and culture, but it has also been tied to and influenced by the legacy of colonialism and neocolonialism (Howard & Burns, 2015) potentially due to the geographical origins of volunteers and programs. For example, a 2004 global assessment of civic service programs found that fifty-nine percent of the programs identified were international service programs, and the majority of those programs were “based in North America and Western Europe and implemented in Southern countries” (McBride & Daftary, 2005, p. 3).

The so-called Global North-Global South dichotomy can bring about challenges for volunteer programs originating in North America and Western Europe. Vestiges of colonial power dynamics can emerge among volunteers from former colonizing countries. Northern volunteers may harbor prejudices and assumptions, which can hinder their ability to adjust to their new environment (Devereux, 2008; Howard & Burns, 2015; Storgaard, et al., 2020). While colonialism was not the focus of this research, it was present within the discourse of the research process as North-South volunteer programs can fortify asymmetrical and hegemonic power relations between Global North and Global South actors (Beauregard, 2018). In some cases, research has found instances when volunteers from Global South countries volunteer in other Global South countries (South-South volunteers) there can be a familiarity in culture and shared identity in being formerly colonized that can help the South-South volunteers adapt to their new environment (Baillie Smith, Laurie, & Griffiths, 2017). Due to the significant difference between

North-South and South-South volunteers, this case study will be looking at North-South volunteers, specifically within Costa Rica.

Within Costa Rica, volunteer programs bring volunteers from all over the world to Costa Rica where they work with a range of programs from English teachers to Peace Corps programs to permaculture farm volunteers and much more (Buller, 2012). Volunteers have the opportunity to create impacts through interacting with the volunteer program, as well as the Costa Rican people and economy. They also have the prospect of being impacted by the new and different culture, the local people and the volunteer program. Research has shown that while there are positive impacts on volunteers from these programs, there are also negative impacts on them as well. Viquez (2018) has determined that some of these negative impacts include volunteers having difficulty adapting to the new environment, and volunteer programs having trouble accommodating volunteers' needs.

In order for a volunteer's transition to go smoothly, there must be infrastructure already in place that will help support them while in a community and country that is not their own (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Pre-departure training has the ability to provide the tools and structure volunteers need in order to transition smoothly (Bai, Larimer, & Riner, 2016; Brion, 2020; Furnham & Bochner, 1987; Highum, 2014; Jones, 2008; Larsen, 2015; Paras, et al., 2019). Without effective pre-departure training, volunteers often enter Costa Rica and the organization, community or program with stereotypes, prejudices, misconceptions and expectations that hinder their adaptation to their new environment (Viquez, 2018; Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2017).

There is little published research on pre-departure training for volunteers. However, research can be found on corporate expatriate training (Bördin & Malina, 2014; Bruning & Wang, 2008; Polón, 2017; Shen, 2005). Bördin and Malina (2014) state that with regards to

international assignments with employees at multi-national corporations (MNCs), the first step in the expatriation process is selection and pre-departure training of the individual. Successful pre-departure training creates the foundation on which the expatriate stands when they arrive which has lasting impacts throughout their time as an expatriate and is associated with positive results post-expatriation (Bördin & Malina, 2014). Furthermore, pre-departure training provides accurate information which can help employees make informed choices and have realistic expectations (Neault, 2005). Daher (2019) found that expatriating employees can be ineffective and expensive due to the high rate of failure. Lack of cross-cultural adaptation was cited as the cause when failure occurred (Daher, 2019). Yousef (2020) found that pre-departure training, along with sources of assistance, family adjustment and job characteristics all have the ability to influence cross-cultural adaptation.

A 2015 study on cross-cultural training's impact on expatriate project-turnover found that of the expatriate employees who participated in cross-cultural training only 4.3% did not complete their assignment (Kassar, Rouhana, & Lythreatis, 2015). The same study also found that of those who did not participate in cross-cultural training, 22.2% chose to leave their assignments early. Similarly, Black and Gregersen (1999) concluded that when sending employees to work in a country that is not their own, cross-cultural skills matter equally, if not more than technical skills. Compared to employees who had deficient cross-cultural skills, employees that had excellent cross-cultural skills performed better and had a higher tendency to complete their contract.

Research on pre-departure training for medical students who participate in global health experiences echoes that of multinational corporations and volunteer programs: without pre-departure training participants are often found to be insufficiently prepared prior to entering the

new country (Bessette & Camden, 2017; Ghumman, Tran, Foster, & Arya, 2013; Kassir, Rouhana, & Lythreatis, 2015; Velten & Dodd, 2016). In response to this, the Canadian Federation of Medical Students (CFMS) published national pre-departure training guidelines in 2008 for medical students traveling to ‘low-resource settings’ that contained five core competencies medical students should be skilled in prior to their departure. These included, “cultural competency, language competency, personal health, travel safety, and ethics” (Ghumman, et al., 2013, p. 42). Ghumman et al. (2013) stated that having competency in these five areas would improve medical students’ preparedness and confidence. Elit et al. (2011) argues that in order for pre-departure training to adequately prepare medical students for their global health experience it must facilitate interactions between current students and students who have previously completed an international health elective as well as provide information on the political, social and cultural contexts of the locale.

Much like medical schools, university study abroad programs have an obligation to offer pre-departure training to their students in order to increase their learning experience and to lessen the negative impact that a student group may have on the local community (Bessette & Camden, 2017). In 2008, students at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine created and implemented a global health course for all first-year students and a required pre-departure ethics training that students had to complete prior to taking international electives in an attempt to counter this training gap (Moran, et al., 2015). Two years later, Harvard University developed a global health curriculum course that provided clinical knowledge and skills to work effectively in resource-limited settings (Nelson, Saltzman, & Lee, 2011). In 2013, the Stanford University Center for Global Health and the Johns Hopkins University Berman Institute of Bioethics published a free pre-departure introductory curriculum on ethical challenges for short-term

global health experiences. It includes ten cases where an ethical challenge is presented, the reader is asked to pick the correct solution out of four options (DeCamp et al., 2013). Pre-departure curricula and courses like those at Harvard, Johns Hopkins and Stanford University are helping to adequately prepare medical students for their international experience.

University students who participate in study-abroad programs are also in a position to benefit from pre-departure training. Like Moran, et al. (2015) and Nelson, Saltzman & Lee (2011), Highum (2014) states that students who have completed a pre-departure orientation process are more prepared for the experience abroad because they are able “to lean into” the learning experience. Some of the pre-departure training topics Highum (2014) suggests include establishing goals and objectives, health and safety, mental health self-care, managing expectations and the importance of reflection. In order to adapt to and connect with another culture, reflection and critical thinking must start before departing (Highum, 2014). Paras et al. (2019, p. 23) came to a similar conclusion stating that students are able to increase their intercultural development most effectively when there is “pre-departure intercultural training, on-site discussion and reflection, and post-return reflection.” Goldstein (2019) found that after completing pre-departure training sessions that focus on intercultural learning, study abroad students improve their ability to adapt to new a culture.

An analysis of study abroad programs for social work students found that 1.75% of programs provided a formal pre-departure course. As a result, the Department of Social Work at Elizabethtown College designed a semester-long course to assist students to critically reflect on and mentally and emotionally prepare for their upcoming international experience (Dunlap & Mapp, 2017). Bai, Larimer & Riner (2016) found that a pre-departure training consisting of basic language skills and information on the local context and culture gave students a foundation to

build upon when in-country. This foundation is also necessary, but absent for faculty who participate in international university programs.

In recent years, universities and institutions of higher education have seized the opportunity to internationalize their programs and degrees by sharing faculty across borders. Consequently, faculty are being asked to teach cross-culturally without any preparation or pre-departure training. Faculty have reported feeling “under-informed, under-supported, underprepared and under-confident” with regards to cross-cultural teaching (Nawaz, 2018, p. 1084). Larsen (2015) reports that pre-departure training should focus on the socio-cultural contexts that faculty will be working in so that faculty can have a comprehensive understanding prior to entering the country.

Research on volunteer host institutions is sparse (Lough, Tiessen, & Lasker, 2018). The focus of the research tends to be on the volunteers’ experiences and perspectives, creating a gap in research on organizational experiences and perspectives (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2017). However, Chang (2005) discusses the lack of human resource development within NGOs, specifically concerning international volunteer training and development organizations stating that, “well-designed training programs can benefit both the volunteers and the organizations that they serve, and the perceived benefits also affect volunteer recruitment, retention, personal growth, and performance quality” (p. 8). Chang (2005) also states that there is no clear consensus on how to effectively train international volunteers instead there are a multitude of variables to consider, including the interdisciplinarity of the field, volunteers’ diverse cultural backgrounds, volunteer experience, local culture, and the amount of in-country support available to volunteers. Hammersley (2012) argues that volunteer programs need a more structured educational approach through pre-departure sessions. Other research findings include the importance of pre- and post-

arrival communication between the volunteer and the program staff, while other research focuses on the importance of intercultural readiness and diversity training (Velten, 2015; Dodd, 2007; Viquez, 2018).

Culture is a key topic in pre-departure training for volunteers. For example, when living in a foreign country, volunteers experience cultural distance as they are away from their own country and culture (Furnham & Bochner, 1987). Pre-departure training that includes cultural orientation and managing culture shock can help assuage negative effects of living outside of one's own culture (Furnham & Bochner, 1987). Other research suggests gathering volunteer information through a pre-training questionnaire that includes "questions related to the participants' learning styles, their motivations, their goals, their hobbies and their cultural background" in order to holistically understand the volunteer and design appropriate trainings (Brion, 2020, p. 390). According to Brion (2020), surveys of this nature should be taken into account as the training is developed due to the impacts one's own culture can have on understanding and adapting to a new culture. Viquez (2018), for example, found that improved pre-departure training could contribute to easing tensions between organizations and volunteers. Similarly, Laichak (2018) found that pre-departure close collaboration and communication between the organization and volunteers led to more beneficial experiences for volunteers. Pre-departure training that includes integration and interaction between the volunteer and members of the organization such as host country advisors, local managers, and other in-country staff results in multiple influences on the volunteer (Jones, 2008). Pre-departure training also allows the volunteer to begin hearing and interacting with local knowledge and practices prior to arriving in-country (Jones, 2008). This interaction can help create a positive volunteer experience, along with creating feelings of belonging and importance (Skoglund, 2006).

One organization that trains their volunteers in intercultural readiness and diversity is the Peace Corps. They do this through a mandatory, three-month pre-service training that occurs in the country of service with other Peace Corps volunteers (Buller, 2012). Though this is not pre-departure training, it is similar in that it happens before the volunteers take on their role within the community. Currently, there is no universal standard for how to prepare volunteers through pre-departure training, nor is there universal use of pre-departure trainings within volunteer programs (Velten & Dodd, 2016). The gaps in research on the benefits of pre-departure training for volunteers highlighted by Velten and Dodd (2016) are testimony to the importance of this research and its intent to lend to a greater understanding of the benefits of volunteer pre-departure training as a mechanism for volunteer success.

Research Design and Methodology

Researcher Positionality

During the researcher's time as a Program Manager in Costa Rica, he was in charge of the volunteers' experiences, both inside the classroom and outside of the classroom from arrival until volunteers exited the program. This included, but was not limited to, orientation; class observations; management of inter- and intra- personal needs; culture shock training and support; and homesickness support. In this research, all of the participants are former volunteers that he supervised. The researcher's prior relationship with the participants introduced bias as he was already partially aware of their experiences and he initiated and sent the requests to participate in the research. Because the researcher sent the participation requests, there was an opportunity for him to pick specific volunteers in order to skew the research to his interests. The researcher sought to minimize this by sending the questionnaire to all former volunteers that he worked with and by asking all former volunteers, program managers and recruiters that he worked with

to participate in a semi-structured interview. Each recipient decided whether to participate. It is important to recognize the relevant bias generated in this sample population as it is possible that the volunteer and staff contacts that the researcher maintained pertain to a particular volunteer and staff profile or population.

Ethics of the Research

The researcher is no longer involved with the ABI program, with Aliarse, nor with any volunteer-based organization within Costa Rica. All participants were given a consent form and the researcher also verbally made it clear that they could refuse to answer any question(s) or stop the interview at any time with no penalties or repercussions.

Some of the questions asked in the semi-structured interview and questionnaire could have brought up negative memories for participants. Before asking potentially sensitive questions, the researcher asked participants for their permission to broach the topic. In the questionnaire, the researcher asked the interviewees their race, gender and age to understand how their identities may have impacted their transition to the new environment. Not all participants were comfortable answering these questions, one participant left the age question blank and two participants left race blank. The researcher reminded the participants that they were not required to answer any questions that they did not want to answer.

Limitations Inherent to the Research Design and Execution

The research process was limited by the timing of the study. Interviews were conducted only after the participants had completed their volunteer experience. Ideally, the semi-structured interviews would have been conducted in-person before and after pre-departure training, during

their volunteer experience and upon completion of the program. Also, in-person focus groups would have been conducted upon arrival to Costa Rica, during their time in Costa Rica and upon completion of the program. Having these focus groups would have allowed for tracking of their experiences over time to better understand the training process and its outcomes. Due to time limitations and the Covid-19 pandemic, all of the research was conducted virtually, and all volunteers were post-service. The experiences of all interviewees were not fresh in their minds; this may have impacted the results. For some interviewees, it may have been up to two years since they completed their service. Another limitation was sample size. Ideally, there would have been a larger sample size, but this was also limited by both Covid-19 and the time constraints of the Capstone research period.

Sample Population Selection and Data Collection Methods

The two sampling methods used were convenience sampling and snowball sampling (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). This is, in part, due to COVID-19 restricting the safety of travel which not only impacted the researcher's ability to travel to Costa Rica to conduct research, but also the ability of volunteer programs to be open. These sampling methods also worked well within the time constraints that existed for this research.

One sample population was selected, it included volunteers who had volunteered as English teachers with Aliarse's Skills for Life program in Costa Rica in the past two years. All participants were at least eighteen years of age. The participants were informed that participating in the questionnaire and interview was voluntary, that they would remain anonymous and that there were no penalties for not participating, or for only participating in either the questionnaire or the interview.

The sample population received a questionnaire. Some participants also chose to complete a semi-structured interview (Galletta, 2012). A total of thirty questionnaires and sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in January and February of 2021. Both questionnaires and the interviews were conducted virtually. These two data collection methods were chosen for the volunteer sample population so that qualitative and quantitative data could be collected and analyzed within the Capstone timeframe. Questionnaires offer many advantages to researchers, they take less time, and are “effective with most study populations whose reading and comprehension levels are good” (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte Ph.D., 1999, p. 194). However, because they are self-administered by the participant, they may not capture all of the information that the researcher is looking for. In order to bridge this possible gap, the researcher used semi-structured interviews in addition to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire generated background information, as well as started the process of bringing forward the memories of how the volunteers felt both pre-departure and during their time in-country. It also provided former volunteers the opportunity to give answers that they may not have been comfortable saying directly to the researcher in a video interview. The semi-structured interviews allowed for a deeper exploration into the various ways that pre-departure training affected volunteers. The semi-structured interviews also allowed for exploration of the participants’ experiences and how the training they received impacted their experiences.

Aliarse’s program manager and a recruiter also completed semi-structured interviews, however, there were not enough participants to be considered a sample population. For this reason, their semi-structured interviews are included as opinions. The program manager and recruiters sample population did not receive a questionnaire, instead they only participated in semi-structured interviews because the researcher was not collecting as much background

information from them. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with this population in February of 2021. The beginning of the interview contains a few background questions. The interviews allowed for an open dialog with the program managers and recruiters on their perspectives on the pre-departure training, as well as their perspectives on the successes, challenges and struggles volunteers faced in-country. Opinions from program staff are an integral element of this research as they provide the seldom-studied organizational perspective on volunteer pre-departure training. Program managers and recruiters are familiar with Costa Rican culture and are acquainted with the volunteers, which can give them a unique perspective on pre-departure training effectiveness.

Data Analysis Methods

This case study draws on quantitative and qualitative data collected by the researcher from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews over two months. There were a total of thirty questionnaire responses, sixteen of the thirty former volunteers also completed semi-structured interviews with the researcher. All participants volunteered as English teachers with Aliarse between 2019 and 2020. The data that came from the questionnaires and interviews were compiled into a spreadsheet and then disaggregated for age, race, previous experience volunteering, previous experience teaching English, previous experience living internationally and in rural areas, and length of time between acceptance to the program and the start of orientation. These qualifiers were disaggregated to measure their impact on the volunteers' experience in a new country and how each qualifier, or a specific combination of qualifiers impacted the level of preparedness felt by volunteers (Stout, 1997). Where supported by data,

connections were drawn between the various disaggregates and the level of preparedness volunteers felt prior to starting in-country orientation.

Findings

Volunteer Findings

Thirty former volunteers participated through questionnaires. Volunteers ranged in age from twenty-two to sixty-five with 48% in the 20s, 21% in their 30s, 0% in their 40s, 21% in their 50s, and 10% in their 60s (Figure

1). Volunteers tended to be female (73%)

(Figure 2) and from the United States (83%)

(Figure 3), though each of the following

countries were also represented: United

Kingdom, Canada, Northern Ireland, Estonia

and Australia. Ninety-three percent of

participants identified their race, of that, sixty-

eight percent self-identified as white-Caucasian,

and thirty-two percent self-identified as a non-

white race (Figure 4). Fifty-three percent of the

participants reported their highest level of formal education as a bachelor's degree (or country

equivalent). The breakdown of the other participants was High School 13% – associate degree –

7% Master's Degree – 23%, and Juris Doctor/Medical Doctor/PhD – 3%. There was insufficient

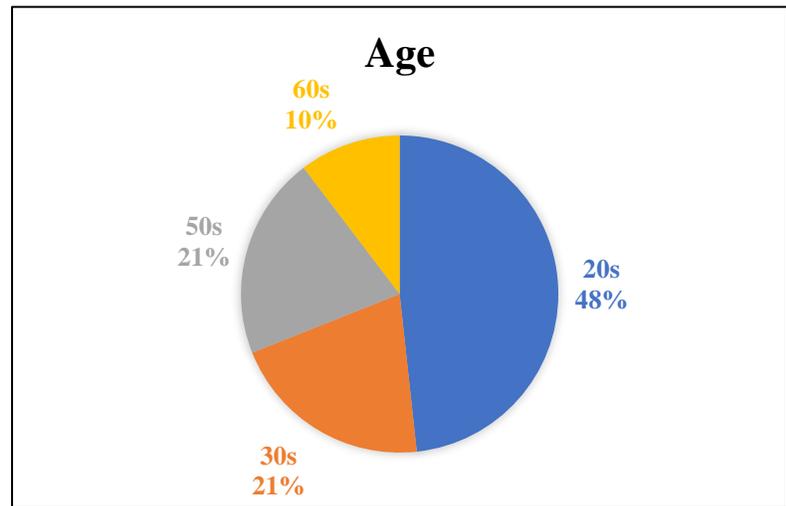


Figure 1 Percentage breakdown of participants' ages

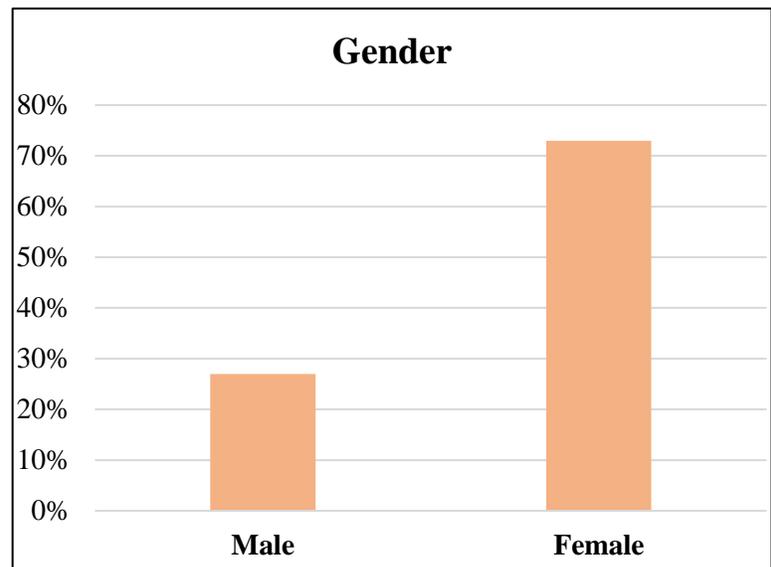


Figure 2 Percentage breakdown of males and females

data within each subset to disaggregate based on age, gender, country of origin, race and level of formal education.

According to the questionnaire results, half of respondents had less than four weeks between acceptance and in-country orientation while the other half had between one and six months. The length of this timeframe is important because the less time a volunteer has between acceptance and in-country orientation, the less time they have to prepare themselves or complete pre-departure training. In order to adapt and connect with another culture, reflection and critical thinking must start before departing (Highum, 2014). Therefore, if a volunteer has less than four weeks between acceptance and in-country orientation they have less time to reflect on the journey they are about to take. Highum (2014) also

found that students who have completed a pre-departure training are more prepared for the experience abroad, and are better positioned to benefit from it. This is because they have a foundation to build upon when in-country (Bai, Larimer & Riner, 2016). Of the fifty percent of participants who had less than four weeks before departure, two-thirds applied to the program through their Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) school in Costa Rica meaning

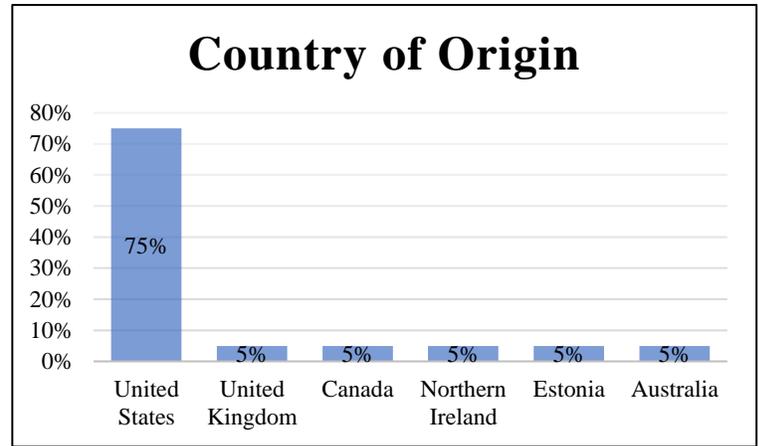


Figure 3 Percentage breakdown of participants based on country of origin

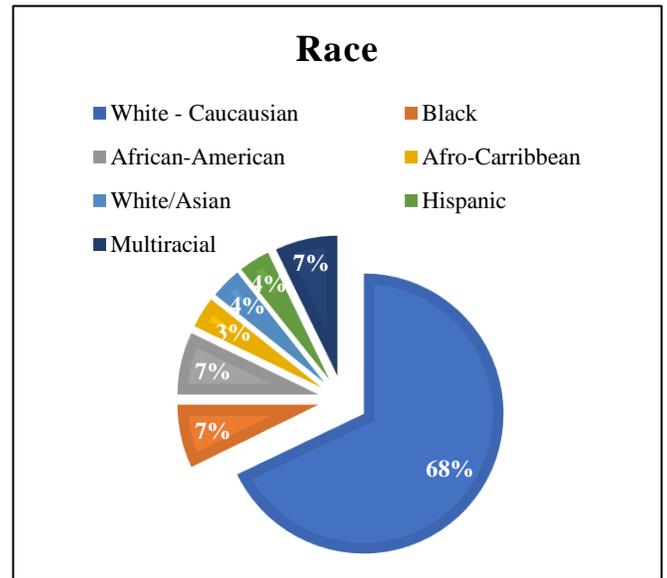


Figure 4 Percentage breakdown of participants based on race

they were already in Costa Rica when they applied for the program. Because they were in Costa Rica for at least one month to complete their TEFL certification course, these volunteers already had exposure to Costa Rican culture. Out of this group of ten, 80% had less than one month of teaching experience and 20% had between one and three months of teaching experience.

When asked “On a scale of 1-10 how prepared did you before orientation started (1-not prepared, 5 – neutral, 10 – over prepared)?” 90% selected a five or six and 10% selected a four, five was labeled ‘neutral’. When asked what they did not feel prepared for, the responses fell into teaching and culture (Table 1).

What did volunteers not feel prepared for?	
Culture	Teaching
Placement Location	Lesson Planning
Cross-cultural adaptation	Student motivation
Navigating a new culture	Being able to implement the curriculum

Table 1 Elements that volunteers who had less than four weeks between acceptance into the program and the start of orientation did not feel prepared for.

Comparatively, for the five participants who had less than four weeks between acceptance and in-country orientation, but did not apply through their TEFL school, there were near identical results for both level of preparedness (Table 2) and what they did not feel prepared for.

Level of Preparedness Against Three Factors			
	Less than 4 weeks between acceptance and orientation AND applied through Costa Rican TEFL school	Less than 4 weeks between acceptance and orientation BUT DID NOT apply through Costa Rican TEFL school	More than 4 weeks between acceptance and orientation AND DID NOT apply through Costa Rican TEFL school
Range for Level of Preparedness	4-6 on a 1-10 scale	4-7 on a 1-10 scale	4-9 on a 1-10 scale
Mean for Level of Preparedness	5.3 on a 1-10 scale	5.4 on a 1-10 scale	6.0 on a 1-10 scale

Table 2 Average level of preparedness for volunteers and length of time between acceptance and orientation and avenue of application

For the fifty percent of participants that had between one and six months between acceptance and in-country orientation, all applied directly to the organization or through a third-party. Their indicated level of preparedness had a larger range and slightly higher average (Table 2). When asked what they did not feel prepared for the responses varied from class size, teaching conditions, living conditions, administrative duties, and how to teach rural, adult students. These findings are interesting because 40% of the participants in this group said they had more than two years of teaching experience and 20% had less than six months of teaching experience. Black and Gregersen (1999) supports this finding and concluded that when sending employees to work in a country that is not their own, cross-cultural skills matter equally, if not more than technical skills.

International and Rural Experience

There was a 57% to 43% split between those who had lived outside of their country of origin and those that had not, respectively. When participants were asked “On a scale of 1-10 how prepared did you feel before orientation started (1-not prepared, 5 – neutral, 10 – over prepared)?”, there was minimal difference between the groups’ feelings of preparedness (average 6.2 and 5.7 respectively).

Pre-Departure Training Portal

Irrespective of their self-reported identity, all sixteen interviewees stated that they would have engaged with a pre-departure training portal that contained various modules in a variety of forms (written, video, forum, articles) on Costa Rican culture, English teaching and Aliarse. Furthermore, all interviewees felt that a pre-departure training portal would have facilitated their

transition to Costa Rica and to the Aliarse program. All sixteen participants stated that although they likely would not have utilized all of the material, they would have browsed and engaged with the resources on the portal.

Recommendations from Volunteers on Pre-departure Training for Volunteers

Ninety-four percent of the interviewees said interacting either directly or indirectly with current and former teachers could have helped them set expectations or have more realistic expectations. Creating spaces for information exchange prior to departure is supported by Neault (2005) who found that pre-departure training can help employees make informed choices and have realistic expectations. Participants recognized the value of creating connections between current and former volunteers. More than seventy-five percent of participants placed high importance on the portal being largely based on and created by previous and current Aliarse teachers and their experiences. Furthermore, one participant said that, “for a volunteer program, being able to see videos of the actual classrooms and how many students are in them or hear volunteers talk about rural life or see lesson plans might scare off the people who shouldn’t be there anyways and help the people who should be part of the program.” The desire to have the resources to set realistic expectations is important to note because recent research has shown that regarding international health electives (IHE) experiences, there was a “mismatch between the conditions encountered in low-resource settings, student expectations of the IHE and the support and oversight available from both local and home institutions” (Elit et al., 2011, p. 709). Jackson and Adarlo (2017, p. 2349) also found that “mismatches of expectations with realities... can hinder volunteers in performing their work, and in perceiving it as beneficial both to themselves and to the communities”.

At the end of the interview and questionnaire, participants were asked, “Now that you have completed your in-country service, what types of readings, videos or topics do you think belong in a pre-departure training portal?” The motivation for this question was to gain insight into volunteers’ recommendations on content for the portal. Their answers have been compiled into three categories: Aliarse, Culture and Teaching as these were the three themes that emerged (Appendix 1.1). Eighty-eight percent of interviewees identified “how to adapt to the culture” as an important pre-departure training topic, which recognizes the need for greater resources and support on cultural adaptation. Furnham and Bochner (1987) found that pre-departure training that includes cultural orientation and how to cope with culture shock can help assuage negative effects of living outside of one’s own culture. Other research has focused on the importance of intercultural readiness and diversity training (Velten, 2015; Dodd, 2007; Viquez, 2018).

Participants suggested that videos or testimonials be provided from former teachers on what to expect in terms of addresses, transportation, pharmacies, medical care, and cost of living. Additionally, they recommended forums on language and safety tips, as well as videos of the host families and their homes, including information on rural Costa Rican life. In terms of teaching, participants suggested videos or blogs from former teachers on ‘a day in the life’ and ‘what to expect – teaching’ (i.e., number of students, classroom management, materials, available technology).

Program Staff Opinions

These opinions were collected by the researcher in semi-structured interviews. There were two interviewees, both were employed by Aliarse as program staff, one as a program manager and the other as a recruiter. One is still a program staff member. Both program staff

members are Costa Rican women who worked with Aliarse for more than one year. Both hold master's degrees from Costa Rica and have experience teaching English as a second language. The interviewees said that Aliarse provided pre-departure reading materials but did not offer pre-departure training. The reading materials contained information on what to bring, what to expect in Costa Rica, and what to do upon arrival. However, one felt that the information was too general and did not cover specific areas. When asked whether they felt the materials prepared volunteers for their time in country, one felt it did not have an effect while the other felt it prepared the volunteers slightly. The program staff member who felt it prepared the volunteers slightly said she felt it did so because the pre-departure reading material provided information on "Costa Rica's lifestyle that was not necessarily tourist oriented". The program staff member who felt the pre-departure materials did not have an effect on preparing the volunteers said she felt this way because there was not enough information on the locations where the program operated and suggested there should be more material on the "culture, people and manners" of each location because it "changes greatly from coast to coast". The other felt there needed to be a deeper emphasis on the program's in-country expectations for volunteers and the reality of in-country infrastructure. Both felt that the pre-departure reading materials could have been improved with more specific information. The need for more material on culture is supported by the literature; for example, Black and Gregersen (1999) concluded that when sending employees to work in a country that is not their own, cross-cultural skills matter equally, if not more than technical skills. Furnham and Bochner (1987) also found that pre-departure training that includes culture-learning and how to cope with culture shock can help assuage negative effects of living outside of one's own culture. Other research has focused on the importance of intercultural readiness and diversity training (Velten, 2015; Dodd, 2007; Viquez, 2018).

When asked what were the top five areas that volunteers struggled with while in Costa Rica the two staff members gave different answers (Table 3). Program Staff Member 1 identified five areas related to cultural adaptation, while Program Staff Member 2 identified two areas related to cultural adaptation and three areas related to teaching. Furthermore, the participants identified unrealistic expectations about classroom infrastructure, lack of ability to adapt to the local culture and lack of clarity from the organization as motivations for volunteer attrition. The staff members’ opinions on volunteer struggles and causes of attrition coincide with recent research that found that to achieve success when working outside of their own culture, international volunteers need structured assistance and training on cultural adaptation and cross-cultural training (Chang, 2005; Jackson & Adarlo, 2016; Black & Gregersen, 1999; Lough, Tiessen, & Lasker, 2018; Milbourn, Black, & Bachanan, 2019).

Areas that Volunteers Struggled with while in Costa Rica	
Program Staff Member 1	Program Staff Member 2
1 Culture shock	1 Language
2 Work schedule	2 Teaching the curriculum
3 Personal safety	3 Class materials
4 Machismo	4 Teaching location
5 Not getting things they’re used to getting in their home country	5 Class management

Table 3 Topics and areas that volunteers struggled with while in Costa Rica

With regard to pre-departure training, one participant did not think a pre-departure portal would have helped volunteers because she felt reading or hearing other people tell their stories would not help new volunteers with their own cultural adaptation. The other participant felt that a pre-departure training on the curriculum that Aliarse uses, as well as instructions on how to utilize the curriculum with minimal resources would have been beneficial for volunteers. In comparison, research has found that without effective pre-departure training, volunteers often enter the country and the organization, community or program with stereotypes, prejudices,

preconceptions and expectations that hinder their adaptation to their new environment (Viquez, 2018). In this instance, the literature and the program staff opinions counter one another.

Conclusions

Volunteers

Two conclusions that can be drawn from the volunteer findings are that former Aliarse volunteers would use a pre-departure training portal and that they feel it would have helped them during the transition to their new environment. Participants indicated that they would want to see, hear and interact with other volunteers, whether that be indirectly through pre-recorded videos, testimonials and blogs or directly through live forums. Whether talking about culture or teaching, they want to engage with the people who have walked in the shoes and down the paths that they too will soon be in and walk on. Future volunteers have a shared experience and identity with current and former volunteers. This shared identity gives way to future volunteers trusting the perspectives of current and former volunteers.

More data are needed to disaggregate based on identities such as race, age, gender, country of origin, and level of formal education so as to analyze how those identities interact with being an international volunteer in Costa Rica and, how, depending on a volunteers' identity, pre-departure training can be improved in order to facilitate a smoother transition into the volunteers' new environment.

Aliarse can improve its pre-departure training for international volunteers by creating an online pre-departure training portal that volunteers are able to interact with prior to and during their time in country. The portal could contain various modules in a variety of forms (written, video, forum, articles) on Costa Rican culture, English teaching and the organization. Some

examples of modules are ‘Who and what is Aliarse’, ‘A Day in the Life of an Aliarse Teacher’, ‘How I Coped with Culture Shock’, ‘Classroom Management in an Aliarse Classroom’ and ‘What it’s Like to Host a Volunteer’. The portal would be created by program staff, host families, social workers, and students, but most importantly it would be generated by current and former volunteers. The portal could facilitate a smoother transition into the volunteers’ new environment as it could provide real, up-to-date, applicable information that comes directly from those in the program. Volunteers would be able to see and hear first-hand experiences from teachers that came before them, which could give them the opportunity to learn and deepen their knowledge before arriving in Costa Rica. Being able to interact with other volunteers’ firsthand could also support them in setting realistic expectations.

The forums could contain a shared space where former, current and future volunteers could read previous posts, create new posts, answer questions and engage in discussion. Forums could focus on topics pertaining to culture, teaching and general questions about the organization or program. Each forum could contain frequently asked questions (FAQs), pictures, videos, or links to resources. The forums could be a space for volunteers to build rapport while engaging and interacting with each other on self-generated topics. It could also be a space for program staff to answer questions and begin to build their rapport with future volunteers.

Volunteers would be able to customize their pre-departure training by interacting with as many or as few of the modules as they want based on what they feel they need. The portal would provide space for them to share their expertise on the forums, which would build rapport among teachers prior to arriving in Costa Rica. Instead of meeting for the first time on the first day of in-country orientation, they would be able to interact with, learn from, and lean on one another in a virtual space, before doing so in a shared physical space.

Practical Application

The findings have practical application for an international volunteer program that wants to invest in creating a pre-departure training portal. Though this case study is based on a volunteer English teaching program, a pre-departure portal can be adjusted to work for corporate, academic and volunteer settings by changing the content to fit the needs of the people using it. For example, an international volunteer program could create a pre-departure training portal for their international volunteers based on the findings and conclusions in this case study. Their pre-departure portal would have to be adapted to their context, in terms of culture, type of program and volunteer backgrounds. The portal could be updated continuously as more volunteers interact with the portal and program.

The data indicate that pre-departure cross-cultural training is important, which speaks to the gaps in the research identified in the literature review. Based on the findings, this research proposes that a pre-departure training portal could facilitate a smoother transition into a volunteer's new environment. The portal is currently a recommendation on how Aliarse could improve their pre-departure experience in order to facilitate a smoother transition into the volunteers' new environment and ultimately reduce volunteer attrition.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research needs to be done to analyze the outcomes of an organization implementing a pre-departure training portal using two groups who volunteered with the same organization and in the same country but where one group engaged with the portal while the other received no pre-departure training. Another avenue for further research would be to compare groups who did and didn't use the portal during the same year.

Further research also needs to be conducted on international volunteer attrition. Relevant questions for research include: Does organizational support, pre-departure training, on-site support, and/or language support play a role in attrition and if so, in what way? Is there a connection between attrition and one of the following factors: a volunteer's age, race, previous experience volunteering, previous experience teaching English, previous experience living internationally and in rural areas, or length of time between acceptance to the program and the start of orientation? In accordance with the research findings, pre-departure training portals could be customized to the needs of participants in ways that will decrease participant attrition.

Another avenue of research includes the efficacy of pre-departure training versus in-country training. Research questions include: Does one have more impact than the other on volunteer transition and volunteer attrition? Is there a combination of pre-departure training and in-country training or in-country support that is most effective in decreasing attrition and increasing smooth transitions? Furthermore, how do the different identities of a volunteer (age, race, previous experience volunteering, previous experience teaching English, previous experience living internationally and in rural areas, or length of time between acceptance to the program and the start of orientation) interact with different combinations of pre-departure training and in-country training? Does one identity need more pre-departure training than another?

To date, research on the volunteer sector has focused on the volunteers and not on the organizations and staff that host them. In the future, research also needs to be done on pre-arrival training for the host organization. Are there trainings that staff of the host organization can conduct in order to be well-prepared for the international volunteers? How can staff trainings help reduce attrition rates for volunteers?

The volunteer industry has the opportunity to be impactful, but it is often hindered by attrition. Pre-departure training could be the answer to this issue by creating a smoother transition for volunteers as they enter a new environment. Pre-departure training for North-South volunteers in Costa Rica is a field that requires significantly more exploration, both in theory and in practice. Fortunately, international volunteering is likely to continue to grow, allowing ample opportunities for further research on the theory and practice of pre-departure training.

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Appendix

1.1 “Now that you have completed your in-country service, what types of readings, videos or topics do you think belong in a pre-departure training portal?” Their answers have been compiled below into three categories: Aliarse Culture and Teaching as these were the three themes that emerged. Suggestions that were mentioned several times are indicated with an asterisk (*):

Aliarse

- Job description*
- Schedule for orientation*
 - Dress code for orientation
- Program schedule (i.e., national holidays, start and end date for the students)
- What is Aliarse?
- What is the Alliance for Bilingualism?
- What is the Skills for Life program?
- Program locations and information about each location*
 - History of the area
- Rules and protocols

Culture

- Cross-cultural training*
 - How to adapt to the culture
 - How to deal with culture shock
- What is (and is not) socially acceptable in different regions
- Videos from former teachers*
 - “What to expect – culture” (i.e., addresses, transportation, pharmacy, expenses)
 - “What to pack” (i.e., clothing, host family gifts)
- Videos of the culture*
 - Video introductions of host families and their homes*
 - Videos of life in rural Costa Rica*
- Case Studies
 - Give a description of a situation that has happened, ask the volunteer what they would do, then have alternative options
- Forums as a way to connect previous, current and incoming teachers
 - Frequently asked questions (FAQs)
 - Things to visit near X location
 - Language tips and helpful phrases*
 - Safety tips*

Teaching

- Motivational material about the importance of learning English
- Videos from former teachers*
 - Testimonials*
 - “A day in the life”*

- “What to expect – teaching” (i.e., number of students, materials, available technology)*
- Videos of the classrooms*
- Video of a class being taught
- Information on student population*
 - Backgrounds of students (i.e., educational, demographic, economic)
 - Information on trauma informed teaching
- Classroom Management*
 - How to handle behavioral issues*
 - How to handle different skill levels*
- Lesson plans and textbook*
 - Tips on how to teach the lesson plan structure
- Activity/games/warmups from the previous teacher (i.e., favorite / least favorite games)
- Links to YouTube videos that teachers in the program have used
- Case Studies
 - Give a description of a situation that has happened, ask the volunteer what they would do, then have alternative options
- Forums as a way to connect previous, current and incoming teachers
 - Frequently asked questions (FAQs)