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# Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood ▲

Positive Development During the Third Decade of Life

Edited by

Laura M. Padilla-Walker

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## Cultural Immersion as a Context for Promoting Global Citizenship and Personal Agency in Young Adults

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*When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind  
may be challenged to change.*

—Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., 2000

This influential passage from Father Kolvenbach, former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, was delivered as part of a broader challenge to institutions of Jesuit higher education to more deeply integrate “the promotion of justice” into students’ learning opportunities. The passage also speaks to the transformational potential of global service learning and cultural immersion experiences that intentionally expose students to what Kolvenbach characterized as “the gritty reality of this world” for the purpose of learning “to perceive, think, judge, choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed.” Kolvenbach’s challenge essentially defines a pedagogical practice at the heart of all service, or community-based, learning: to actively engage students by opening them up to multiple experiential channels of discovery and meaning-making beyond the confines of a traditional classroom environment. Even more than this, however, Kolvenbach’s words evoke the language of critical educators—John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, among others (see Mitchell, 2008, for further discussion)—who challenge the assumptions and practices of traditional, didactic instruction that purport to be value-free, or neutral, and often turn a blind eye to the world’s injustices and human suffering. Giroux, in particular, is credited with elaborating on a notion of “border pedagogy” as a way to characterize educational spaces, both physical and psychological, that

encourage students "to cross ideological and political borders as a way of furthering the limits of their own understanding" (Giroux, 1992, p. 33). Likewise, Kolvenbach has argued that direct experiences or "contact" with other people and the difficult realities they must confront, rather than abstract "concepts" conveyed in textbooks or classroom lectures, is the most effective catalyst for intellectual inquiry and moral reflection (see Sokol, Hammond, Kuebli, & Sweetman, 2015).

"Border crossing" has become a salient metaphor in the service-learning literature (Taylor, 2002), indicating how community-based learning experiences involve crossing both real and figurative boundaries that, in turn, lead students to form relationships with people from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. These new contexts often challenge learners to move outside their comfort zones and reflect more deeply on their own and others' identities, particularly the social circumstances that shape them. The "border metaphor," as Hayes and Cuban (1997, p. 76) described, "invites us to identify and map the multidimensional boundaries that simultaneously enable and constrain students' service-learning experiences," and that ultimately highlights "the intertwining of identity, thought, and culture in learning." In our case, the metaphor of "the border," as a place to challenge one's understanding and enrich one's identity, was taken quite literally. In this chapter, we will describe the impact of two short-term, cultural immersion experiences on college-age young adults. One immersion experience focused on immigration and the humanitarian crises occurring at the U.S.-Mexico border, and the other called attention to the impoverished conditions and gang violence faced by children struggling for an education in Belize. These two immersion experiences were coordinated by the Center for Service and Community Engagement, in conjunction with Campus Ministry, at Saint Louis University (SLU), a mid-sized, urban Jesuit university in the midwestern United States. Both immersion contexts—at the border and in Belize—set the conditions for disrupting students' worldviews, allowing them to see themselves and their cultures in more critical ways, and creating new sightlines for envisioning themselves as social change agents.

### ▲ Global Citizenship: Enriching Perspectives, Deepening Identities, Inspiring Actions

Young college-age adults are especially primed to gain from opportunities that intersect with issues of identity, personal responsibility, and

authentic action (Arnett, 1998; Finlay, Wray-Lake, & Flanagan, 2010). They are keen not just to act, but, as Giddens (1984) has described, "to being able to make a difference" (p.14)—that is, to see their personal agency have a positive impact in the public sphere, and to have a sense of social and political efficacy (Beaumont, 2010). Far from fitting the exaggerated stereotypes of being irresponsible and self-absorbed (Arnett, 2007), many emerging young adults are seeking a sense of greater purpose and belonging. Youniss and Yates (1997) have suggested, "instead of being focused primarily on the question 'Who am I?' youth are concerned about the society they will inherit and have to decide how they can best relate to it" (p. 22). These societal concerns, in turn, have manifested in record-breaking volunteer trends. The unprecedented levels of community service among U.S. college students over the last decade have led social scientists, policy analysts, and political commentators alike to comment on the evident "Compassion Boom" that has embraced the nation (see Patrick Corvington, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, cited in Berland, 2010). The growth rate of college student volunteers from 2002 to 2005 more than doubled the growth rate of all adult volunteers in the United States (approximately 20% versus just 9%); Corporation for National and Community Service, 2014). This statistic has remained stable with nearly 23% of 16- to 24-year-olds in 2013 indicating their engagement in volunteer service (CNCS, 2014). Moreover, according to a recent report from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI, 2010), over 70% of existing undergraduates have performed volunteer work either "occasionally" or "frequently" in their communities. Immersion experiences are a way to channel these civic motivations. Border pedagogy is a tool to help ensure that personal meaning-making, throughout such experiences, remain connected to broader civic and social justice ideals.

Integral to border pedagogy—in addition to the emphasis placed here on intercultural contact—is the aim to build a "radical democratic society" (Giroux, 1992, p. 28) by creating inclusive contexts that allow all people's voices to be heard and their actions to have meaningful impact. As Giroux (1992) has claimed, border pedagogy compels its proponents to be "attentive to developing a democratic public philosophy that respects the notion of difference as part of a common struggle to extend the quality of public life" (p. 28). The valuing of diversity and democracy embedded in the principles of border pedagogy reflect key dimensions of global citizenship and global service learning programs aimed at promoting intercultural competence, social responsibility, and

civic agency (Hartman & Kiely, 2014a). Indeed, notions of global citizenship frequently trade on the idea of situating oneself in a broader social-relational context, learning to see oneself as belonging to something greater and establishing a commitment to human life that transcends borders (Hartman, 2015, p. 74). Like border pedagogy, global service-learning suggests three fundamental elements that are central to working with students immersed in “volatile and difficult contexts” (Hartman, 2014, p. 1)—that is, Kolvenbach’s (2000) “gritty reality”: (1) open and critical discussion of power asymmetries and privilege, (2) opportunities to integrate global concerns with one’s personal identity, and (3) viable avenues for further action and advocacy following the learning experience. All three of these elements were part of the short-term immersion experiences that we led.

### *The Kino Experience*

During two spring breaks at SLU (2014 and 2015), two different groups of 9 undergraduate students (a total of 18;  $M = 5$ ,  $F = 13$ ) have explored immigration issues and human rights abuses at the U.S.-Mexico border through a 9-day excursion to Nogales, Arizona/Sonora and other destinations in the U.S. Southwest. Most of the students’ time was spent with the Kino Border Initiative (KBI)—a binational, faith-based organization responding to the urgent needs of migrant people at the border and dedicated to promoting long-term change in three areas: humanitarian aid to migrants, raising public awareness of injustices at the border, and applied scholarly research and social justice advocacy for changes in immigration policy.

### *The Belize Experience*

As part of an emerging partnership with the Jesuit community at St. Martin de Porres in Belize City, Belize, a group of 13 SLU undergraduates students ( $M=2$ ,  $F=11$ ) worked with the primary grades at St. Martin’s school for 14 days over the 2014–2015 winter break. The St. Martin’s community has been contending with poverty, increasing gang activity, and violence associated with the illegal drug trade in their neighborhood. In 2012, Belize was ranked as the sixth most violent country in the world, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, due

largely to gang-related homicides in Belize City (United Nations, 2012). St. Martin’s is a sanctuary for many young people trying to avoid gang violence and to improve their lives through education. SLU students were involved with enhancing computer literacy of St. Martin’s teachers and assessing students’ needs to improve classroom management.

### *Self-Reflections and Ratings on Personal Growth*

The students participating in each of these experiences spent 4 to 6 weeks preparing for their immersions, typically meeting for 1 or 2 hours each week to engage in community-building exercises as a group; discuss the issues they anticipated facing and the social, political, and economic dynamics underlying them; and personally reflect on their own values and commitments to social justice. As part of students’ self-reflections, they individually rated themselves in four areas that the immersion leaders, who were faculty and staff instructors, expected to see growth: (1) multiculturalism, (2) volunteerism, (3) advocacy, and (4) spirituality (see Table 11.1). The students rated themselves both before and after the trip portion of their immersion experiences, and they offered remarks about their sense of personal development, as well as what their expectations were and whether they were met. The ratings were on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating low agreement and 5 indicating high agreement. These were collected and recorded by the immersion leaders. To better orient students in their personal reflections to areas of potential change, they were shown, and even allowed to revise, their pre-immersion ratings and remarks when completing their post-immersion reflections. Group reflection and discussion occurred daily throughout the trip portion of students’ immersion experience, but these were not recorded for assessment purposes.

The self-reflection ratings suggested notable increases in each of the target growth areas for the participants. After comparing responses for each immersion experience and cohort, the data were combined for further analyses ( $N=30$ ; one participant did not complete the post-immersion ratings). Mean differences and effect sizes for the pre- to post-immersion ratings in each area were computed. The results are shown in Figure 11.1.

The most sizeable increase involved students’ commitments to advocacy and sense of empowerment to continue promoting social justice in their communities. Several students also noted the emotional

TABLE 11.1 Areas of Growth for Immersion Participants

**Growth Area 1: Multiculturalism**

- How open are you to experiencing new cultures and diverse people?
- How deep is your interest in the topic of immigration or urban poverty/ violence; based on which immersion experience?

**Growth Area 2: Volunteerism**

- How important to you is volunteering to serve others in your community?
- How relevant have your SLU experiences been in shaping your commitments to community service?

**Growth Area 3: Advocacy**

- How committed are you to advocating for the rights of vulnerable or marginalized people?
- How empowered do you feel to positively change your community and promote social justice?

**Growth Area 4: Spirituality**

- How deeply connected is your spiritual life with your concerns for marginalized or under-served people?
- How central is your faith in setting personal priorities and making important decisions?
- How impactful have your SLU experiences been in promoting your spiritual growth?

impact of their experiences, acknowledging the enhanced meaning this created for them. One participant described it this way:

Going into each encounter, I thought I knew the main message of pretty much every perspective we were going to hear. But actually seeing the emotional delivery really put a new meaning behind the words they were saying. This trip really helped me get in

touch with a more compassionate side of myself and has inspired me in relation to the resiliency of the human spirit.

Another participant indicated that the affect-laden dimensions of the experience left a lasting impression and desire to learn more about effective responses to human rights issues:

I will never forget some of these stories I heard or the emotions I faced with every perspective and perception. . . . I learned also that I have so much more to learn and I really think that this trip has encouraged me to investigate more.

Learning during immersion experiences often occurs through affective channels that, in turn, reinforce much of the information to which participants had previously been exposed through more intellectual channels. These findings lend support to Kolvenbach's (2000) claims that direct experiences or "contact" with other people is an effective catalyst for deeper learning and action motivation.

Models of transformational learning, particularly in emerging adulthood (Mezitrow, 1991), have suggested that "disorienting dilemmas" motivate young people to act and behave in new ways, especially after being pressed to articulate the personal meaning of such view-altering situations. One student, for instance, clearly identified the source of her social justice motivations:

I learned that people's stories are what motivate me to serve. I learned that immersing myself in a social justice issue is where I find purpose, meaning and motivation. This trip has affirmed gifts of building relationships.

Our findings further illustrate how students are challenged by critical incidents during immersion experiences to reshape their values and commitments, particularly when facing the stark contrasts that returning to the comfort and cultural hegemony of their homes typically brings (Kiely, 2004; Hermann, 2011; Langdon & Agyeyomah, 2014; Hartman & Kiely, 2014b). One immersion participant remarked,

My world perspective was greatly broadened after learning about the challenges that immigrants face at the border. It made me empathize with their struggles, and coming from a faith lens,

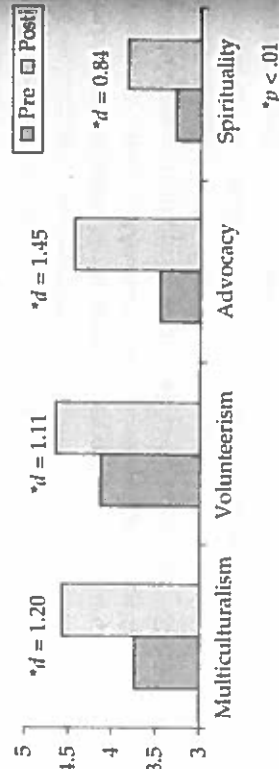


FIGURE 11.1. Comparison of pre- and post-immersion self-reflection ratings.

I saw these people as those greatly in need of a compassionate response. Overall, it strengthened my personal sense of responsibility toward others.

### *Short-Term Experience, Long-Term Impact?*

The impact of the immersion experiences generally relies on creating discomfort and heightened emotionality, as some of our other data indicate. Bowman, Brandenberger, Mick, and Smedley (2010) conducted one of the few quantitative studies using questionnaires to show that well-structured immersion experiences can positively influence college students' attitudes and understanding of social justice issues; this work even suggested that short-term immersions can be as effective, and sometimes even more impactful, than traditional semester-long courses. Using a different assessment tool, the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire, or CASQ (Moely, Mercer, Illustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002), we have also begun to explore the potential for sustained impact, or the lasting changes, of short-term, immersion experiences (see Center for Service and Community Engagement, 2015). This work focuses on a cross-sectional comparison of immersion participants' responses who either completed the CASQ immediately following their immersion (Spring 2015;  $N = 22$ ) or a "delayed assessment cohort" whose experiences occurred at least 4 months earlier (i.e., Spring 2014, Summer 2014, Winter 2014;  $N = 24$ ). The CASQ responses are scored on a 5-point scale (1 = no agreement; 5 = complete agreement) in six topical areas, or subscales: Civic Action, Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills, Political Awareness, Leadership Skills, Social Justice Attitudes, and Diversity Attitudes. The analyses of immediate versus delayed ( $\geq 4$  months) CASQ respondents showed relative stability across the various subscales, with statistically significant differences only for Civic Action and Interpersonal/Problem-Solving subscales.

These findings suggest that civic action and interpersonal dialogue are challenging for students to sustain, at least at the same level of intensity, beyond their immersion experiences. Given the depth of opportunity that most immersions provide for cultivating dimensions of collective action and exchange, this is not an unexpected outcome. The kind of "civic life" and engagement modeled on immersion experiences stands well beyond the more normative levels students experience on

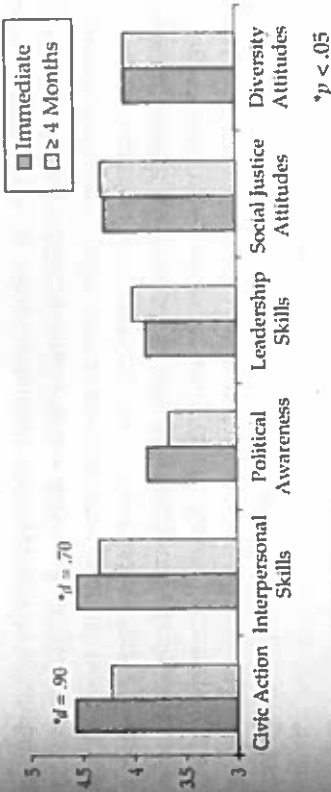


FIGURE 11.2. Comparison of CASQ responses, immediate versus delayed assessment.

a day-to-day basis. The results here are consistent with Kiely's (2004) research indicating that students often struggle with a "chameleon complex" upon reentry to "normal life" from immersion experiences. "They feel disillusioned that people seemed detached from issues of global poverty and/or get annoyed when they question cultural norms that value consumption and materialism. . . . Frequently, students feel compelled to hide their 'true colors', and blend in as a defense mechanism to avoid being chastised for having 'radical views'" (Kiely, 2004, p. 15).

Moreover, many students grapple with the complexity and seeming enormity of the social issues they confront, often for the first time, through immersion experiences. As one student remarked in his self-reflections, "My expectation to come up with a solution was not met, and I realize now why that was really an impossible expectation to have." This statement expresses less disillusionment than uncertainty. Young participants often grapple with the best way to move forward upon reentry, having now been firsthand witnesses to the suffering and injustices of the world. Still, they are poised in emerging adulthood to take purposeful, meaning-making actions that orient them toward just and principled ends (Parks, 2000, p. 6) and which further promote the development of their own sense of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004, 2009; Kegan, 1994) and personal agency.

### ▲ Developmental "Fit" and the Growth of Civil Society

Lerner and Walls (1999) have proposed that "individuals, in action with their changing context, [are] seen to provide a basis of their own

development" (p. 9). That is, human development is a function of person-in-context relations and whether these reflect "good fits." We contend that a key reason why even short-term immersion experiences are so impactful follows from the developmental readiness of participants to benefit from the social and environmental circumstances that these learning experiences typically create. Carefully constructed cultural immersions have mutually reinforcing person-in-context relations. There is a strong "goodness-of-fit" between endogenous and exogenous dimensions of the experience.

The developmental readiness of emerging adults to grow from immersion experiences would benefit from further research. Emerging adults are characterized as "in between" worlds (Arnett, 2006). They reside in the awkward transitional space of leaving behind the constraints of adolescence and beginning to discover the newfound freedoms, but also responsibilities, of young adulthood. Developmental transitions like this, more often than not, have been framed by social scientists as moments of significant psychosocial risk and vulnerability (Noam, Chandler, & Lalonde, 1995). Given that the prior developmental period of adolescence shows a rise in risk-taking behaviors (Lightfoot, 1997), a similar concern about the unique vulnerabilities of being in flux during emerging adulthood would seem well founded. Still, the present evidence regarding the positive impact and educational merits of immersion experiences suggests otherwise. The same "betwixt and between," or liminal, period (Turner, 1964) that makes emerging adulthood a risky proposition for some is what makes it a rewarding growth opportunity for others. Insofar as immersion experiences provide the right conditions for positive development, they serve as a kind of ritual—an educational "rite of passage" (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989)—that supports young persons' successful transitioning to a meaningful adulthood. Next steps in our own research program explore the intersection of meaning-making narratives in college students' faith and civic lives (Sokol, Marle, McEnerney, in preparation). There is considerable interest in the higher education literature to show how faith and civic narratives can be mutually sustaining (Laboe & Nass, 2012). Both kinds of meanings reflect important dimensions of immersion experiences, particularly at Jesuit universities like Saint Louis University. Nevertheless, it is not clear how these dimensions in the meaning-making narratives of young adults either do or do not support each other.

We began this chapter with a description of border pedagogy, its relation to critical global citizenship and service-learning, and the structural conditions of carefully designed cultural immersions experiences. These conditions, we argued, promote key developmental areas in emerging young adults who are navigating diverse perspectives, exploring new identities, and searching for deeper meaning and responsibility. In this sense, immersion experiences are less about cultural *clashes* and more about *intersections* that support meaning-making, identity, and personal agency, while at the same time contributing to a greater collective sense of social responsibility and a radical democratic vision of embracing diverse perspectives. Although our data were contextualized in the language of critical educators like Giroux (1992), our efforts also share much in common with Lerner (2004) and his colleagues' (e.g., Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000) research on positive youth development. Like us, they have examined many of the same social conditions that promote the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and justice, concluding that these stand to promote youth development in the most positive and healthy ways, as well as co-actively contribute to the growth of civil society. We contend that more opportunities for cultural immersion experiences and global service learning will contribute to healthy developmental pathways for individuals and the civic health of communities.

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# Emerging Adult Essay

## Crossing Borders

BY STEPHANIE RODERICK

My name is Stephanie Roderick. I'm a 22-year-old white female, and I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. Currently, I am completing my fourth and final year at Saint Louis University (SLU), where I plan to graduate with a degree in political science and international studies.

Over the past 4 years, I've encountered many impactful experiences both inside and outside the classroom. These encounters have shaped my personal identity, values, and worldview. One experience, in particular, sparked tremendous personal growth. During my junior year, I participated in a university-organized spring break trip to the U.S.-Mexico border. A group of peers and I visited various border towns in the southwestern United States on our journey to better understand the ongoing immigration crisis. We heard incredibly moving stories and saw the hardships many immigrants face firsthand. Learning about and witnessing these complex realities made for a richly rewarding, albeit deeply challenging, experience. I went into the trip expecting to simply learn more about immigration, but I ended up learning more about myself as well. The experience sparked personal growth in several capacities, such as growing in solidarity with immigrants facing daily hardships on the border and learning to put that solidarity to use through active citizenship. Together, these immersion experiences can also have a beneficial impact on the greater community, and they serve to remind today's older adults about the positive contributions to society we younger adults have made and have yet to make.

Before visiting the border, I had studied immigration in various courses and read the news stories, but I still felt relatively removed from the situation. I had a weak sense of solidarity. Living a thousand miles away from the U.S.-Mexico border made it easy to think of immigration in terms of statistics and dollar signs, but seeing the harsh realities firsthand has helped me view the crisis in terms of faces and personal connections. One face that stands out in particular is Maria's (not her real

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name). Maria was a Mexican woman who spent several years living in the United States without documents. She was eventually deported back to Mexico, but instead of accepting defeat, she tried to recross the border a staggering 26 times so that she could reunite with her young children, who were still in the United States. Considering how treacherous the journey through the desert and across the border can be, I admired Maria for her dedication and her unwillingness to stop fighting for her children. The power of her love was incredibly moving. At the same time, however, it was quite upsetting to hear her story. The tragedy she encountered along the way, the pain in her voice as she retold the story, and the despair in her eyes were strikingly poignant. I empathized with Maria, and it seemed as though I had crossed a psychological border where immigrants in the borderlands were no longer faceless, nameless people. My sense of solidarity increased.

As a result of this increased sense of solidarity, I have grown in my capacity as a citizen and political actor. Before visiting the border, I didn't believe my vote and political voice made much of a difference, but as I saw how policies directly affect individuals on the ground, and as I realized that I am as a U.S. citizen theoretically responsible for upholding such policies, a gnawing sense of personal responsibility and guilt came over me. This realization encouraged me to assume a greater political identity and become a more active citizen so that I might be a part of the solution and not a part of the problem. In the time since, I have written to my legislative representatives expressing my opinions. I've signed various petitions, and worked to raise awareness on not just immigration issues, but on all types of social justice issues. There is a certain commitment I now uphold to a justice that transcends borders, and I now feel an obligation to advocate politically on behalf of those with whom I have grown in solidarity. My understanding of active citizenship and implementing political change has positively developed as a result of this immersion trip.

While this experience on the border has influenced my personal growth in numerous ways beyond these areas, I've also come to believe this experience has impacted my community as well. On a basic level, the other students and I sparked much needed conversations—debates even—regarding social justice issues within our communities. We held meaningful discussions about our encounters with our friends, roommates, parents, siblings, fellow students, or coworkers. Even if in just a small way, through dialogue we extended our knowledge to those

who had listened to our stories or seen our pictures. As a result, they were also exposed to the issues we encountered, and some similarly felt compelled to take action. The impact of this experience stretched into the community.

The immersion trip has also affected the local community in the sense that it has helped shape young adults into responsible community members of the future. It reinforced the groundwork on how to think critically about social issues and how to evaluate effective response options to these issues. The trip also instilled a sense of justice and illustrated why we should strive for it. It showed us the importance of being responsible members of our communities. The immersion trip was a powerful and unforgettable experience. As my peers on the trip and I grow into adulthood, I suspect these lessons will further develop and influence our actions. In my case at least, the memories will remain with me as I continue to grow and find my place in the world. I would wager that I am not alone in feeling this way. The community at large can benefit from an opportunity that develops younger adults into more responsible, thought-filled older adults.

With that said, many older adults tend to look down on today's youth. They write us off as self-absorbed, lazy, and completely consumed by our electronic devices, but they fail to recognize the positive contributions to society some of us strive to make. Many of us are indeed interested in pursuing justice and leaving our communities better than how we found them. My goal is to see change in my lifetime. As a young adult, I'm actively seeking out opportunities that will prepare me to work toward change in the future. My time in young adulthood is my opportunity to figure out who I am, to develop my morals, and to plan for the future so that I might mature into a respectable adult. Participating in opportunities such as the immersion trip to the U.S.-Mexico border has helped me develop the tools and cultivate the passion necessary to accomplish such a task. Given that, when some older adults only see yet another self-absorbed, lazy, electronically addicted young person when they look at me, it can be quite frustrating and rather insulting. Their opinions degrade the positive activities in which we young adults have participated. They criticize and stereotype us for behavior that is not necessarily accurate. It's as though some older adults have built fences and seek to distance themselves from today's younger generation. Speaking as a young adult who is currently on her journey across the border into full-fledged adulthood, it would be

helpful if the older generation built bridges instead of fences. Of course, the opposite is also true. Some young adults can certainly make themselves more available to their older counterparts as well. The underlying point is simply that we have much to learn from each other. If we can combine the younger generation's passion and drive with the older generation's wisdom and life experience—if we can relax our borders and grow in solidarity—together we can build stronger communities and engage more effectively in the pursuit of justice.

