

International Undergraduate Education: A Collaborative Service Learning Experience in Honduras, Central America

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Nursing international education at the undergraduate and graduate levels has been experienced by only a small number of students. In many instances both professional and personal barriers have prevented students from having a learning experience in a foreign country. One certainty for nursing and nursing education is that nurses of the 21st century will be called upon to deliver population based health care to the international as well as the local community.¹

In recent years interest in study abroad has increased. American universities are offering students the opportunity to study in many countries throughout the world. Kennesaw State University, through the International Studies Department, has developed a number of international study abroad opportunities for students and faculty in Mexico, Italy and France to name a few.

Typically nursing students and faculty from the United States participate in elective theory and clinical courses abroad. The intent is to expose students to nursing practice, education, health care and the culture of the host country.

There are a number of advantages of using a community health nursing course as a framework for nursing students to study in another culture. The content of a community health course addresses a broad range of topics beyond health, health care and nursing and gives students a framework from which they can focus their learning about the country and the people they are visiting.² In addition, community health nursing has been involved in service learning since its inception. The KSU Department of Nursing has a high level of collaboration with many community service organizations and the concept of reciprocal service experiences between service agencies and nursing programs has long been established in nursing education.

Why service learning? A recent article by Brannen et al (1998)³ indicates that service learning provides a method to combine teaching, learning, service and research while addressing community needs. It provides a means for the faculty mentor to impart to the student values that go beyond curriculum. These values include global and multicultural perspectives, effective communication and interpersonal skills, leadership development and lifelong learning. In order to do this as a community of scholars in the university we must start making connections with the causes and resources that are already aligned with our mission. It is important

to reconnect both within our community and through outreach into broader communities, locally, nationally and internationally.

During the summer a junior nursing student was immersed for two months in a service learning project at a mission in Flores, Comayagua, Honduras, a small village in Central America. Honduras, a developing country, is the second poorest in the western hemisphere. The mission covers many acres and includes grade and high schools, separate boarding quarters for the male and female students, four separate boys' and girls' orphanage complexes and a housing project for single mothers with small children. In addition, the mission has trade schools, such as a woodwork shop, at other sites in Honduras.

The faculty member served as the liaison between the student and the mission. It was decided that the student would do a transcultural community assessment with a focus on the health care needs of the mission population. Upon returning to the United States an independent study elective was developed around the international experience.

All preliminary planning between the faculty and student was done during the spring semester. During this time meetings were conducted with representative volunteers who had spent time at the mission as well as with Father Emil Cook, the founder of the mission over 25 years ago who visits the United States every year. The faculty planned to volunteer to work with the student at the mission for one week in Honduras. The preparation for the project enabled the faculty and the student to interact directly and formulate the goals and objectives of the experience. In addition it provided an opportunity for idea exchange, development of a positive rapport between faculty and student and the identification of previous experiences which would help prepare the student for her upcoming time in Honduras.

The learning outcomes of this unique international service learning experience were many:

- (1) the two month immersion of the student into the Honduran culture provided her with first hand understanding of the culture, socio-economic issues, geography-climate, as well as life-style and language of the Honduran people;
- (2) the experience was recorded by the student in a daily journal. Through

an in depth independent study elective the student analyzed the information gathered and provided recommendations for enhancing the health care of the aggregate population at the mission;

(3) the preparation for the project, the on site collaboration of faculty and student at midpoint, the development of mutual respect between faculty and student, and the ongoing preparation for independent study development added to the success of the international service learning project;

(4) the opportunity provided a highly interactive climate for learning the health needs of the children and mothers, as well as first hand assessment of the health care system and public health needs of the target community;

(5) critical thinking skills were utilized to identify the limitations and lack of available resources, understand the value of time management, and experience leadership and prioritization of the needs of this international community;

(6) this experience provided the student with time to reflect on her values and personal life experiences, which greatly enriched her professional development and approach to nursing practice.

Diane Walsh, (1999)⁴ in a recent article speaks of the challenges that lie behind much of the change agenda taking place throughout higher education including self directed learning, global education and peer collaboration. The faculty of universities play a pivotal role in inventing the future as we conduct our work of teaching, research and service. As educators we have the awesome responsibility to prepare our students for a future we envision and the student in turn will invent that future through their professional practice. This international service learning project in Honduras is one example that not only touches on each of these identified challenges but provides a creative force which will drive lifelong learning, critical thinking and creative problem solving for the global community of the 21st century.

I support Dr. Walsh when she says "that faculty must build the relationships, forge the connections, bind together the pluralistic global learning communities that will provide undergraduates with models to carry throughout their lives, models that inspire lives of purpose and commitment to causes larger than themselves."