

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING

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BACKGROUND

- 4-year NSF funded project
- Research questions:
 - Does participation in service learning such as EWB-USA contribute to a culture of ethical STEM practice?
 - Do participants from service learning projects experience their STEM education in a qualitatively different way than those who do not?
 - How can we learn from the on-ground experiences of students and faculty to identify and promote best practices in humanitarian service learning for a more ethically aware STEM culture?
 - Who is the primary client or beneficiary of SL?
 - What is the balance between helping a community versus or contrasted to student experiences?

METHODOLOGY

- Interviews and Focus Groups with EWB Participants
- Analysis of EWB project documents
- Fieldwork with EWB Chapter
- Interviews with faculty involved in other service learning
- Survey of students (engineering and non-engineering) at UW-Stout

STUDENT IMPACTS

- Students consistently positive about their experiences
- Interviews mostly conducted with committed members
- Impacts on less-involved students unclear



THEMES

- Commitment to personal ethics (“giving back,” “making a difference,” sometimes religions) motivates participation
- Shift in Perspective
- Cultural Learning
- Communication Challenges



ETHICS

“Most people who come into EWB do it for an ethical reason because they want to help people and when we get deeper into that its very interesting to see how we deepen our understanding of what ethics looks like in action.”

“It was ingrained in us that ethics...to own your signature... You're putting your name on it, you need to own it...This is your work, these are your calculations, you're signing it so you need to take responsibility for it.”

“It's not always can we but should we.”

PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS

“I knew I wanted to be an engineer but I didn’t know what I want to do with this. I had no concept that it could be applied in service to other people like that, and so EWB... fundamentally changed my perspective on the world, on what engineering as a profession can do, the impact it can have, and it provided a conduit for me to learn all these things and to actually travel and see different cultures and learn to be more culturally sensitive.”



CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

“So much experience you take for granted in America that you don’t realize that just going over seas and living not in hotels but in tents and in town with the local people; kind of like just being appreciative of what you have here and cross cultural experiences that itself is valuable.”

But... This knowledge is often relatively shallow, especially given short, infrequent visits to project sites.

Others noted what they didn’t know: “I was not expecting this to be such an experience. I thought it was gonna be easier because we speak the same language, but I just find that cultural background makes a lot of difference even if you speak the same language.”

COMMUNICATION AND OTHER CHALLENGES

No access to
expected materials,
supplies,
technologies

Lack of clarity
between chapter
and community
about roles and
responsibilities

Roadblocks outside
the purview of
engineering training
(negotiating land
ownership,
community
conflicts, gathering
social data, etc....)

COMMUNITY IMPACTS

- Often positive (but the timeline is often an issue)
- Unsuccessful projects not necessarily negative
- Some projects exacerbate community conflicts



TWO EXAMPLES

POSITIVE IMPACTS

- Water project, town of about 400 people, rural Latin America
- Functioning water system
- Close knit community; relationships built over time
- Additional projects started

POTENTIAL NEGATIVE IMPACTS

- Small village in rural Asia
- Project scope and aim changed (corn kerneler, single-family latrine, shared sanitation system)
- Kerneler not in use, latrine used/working, sanitation system not completed
- Community rift emerged from (or was exacerbated by?) the project

WHAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE?

Both chapters have a large team of well-trained students



Both had adequate fundraising



Both were able to follow timelines



AND THEN THIS
HAPPENED...



COMMON AND PERSISTENT ISSUES

- Timeline
- NGOs most often are outsiders to a certain extent
- Power and privilege

QUESTIONS?

