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Serving a new community: A sustaining model of international service-learning

Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences, Apr 2003 by Cowan, Donna L., Kagima, Leah, Torrie, Margaret, Hausafus, Cheryl, Machacha, Rachel

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The College of Family and Consumer Sciences at Iowa State University (ISU) pioneered service-learning in ISU study abroad programs serving a new community—a developing country. In concert with our philosophy of "empowering individuals, strengthening families, and enabling communities" and with Rotary International motto, "service above self," a global partnership was forged among American and Kenyan Rotary clubs, universities, and Rotaract (collegiate Rotary).

This partnership addresses humanitarian and literacy support of children and families in diverse communities, advancing international understanding, engendering a heightened awareness of cultural sensitivity and sense-of-service, while building leadership skills within a developing country. Experience Kenya participants engaged in service-learning at a street children's project and at two rural primary schools.

The five-week immersion program is offered on the campus of a major East Africa university. Students engage in classroom and field study, participate in service-learning and home visits, and live and work with local Kenyans. Three credits each are awarded by the host university in creative arts or wildlife biology, and by the sponsoring university in field and cultural study. Male and female undergraduate and graduate students representing different ISU colleges participate.

The service-learning component addressed the street children's project, a resident school program that takes in 120 needy and destitute street children (ages four to late teens) providing food, clothing, bedding, shelter, medical care, primary and secondary education, and vocational education. Students were involved in planting gardens for food for the children, repairing cement floors, digging trenches for the water system, preparing meals, and providing clothing and recreation for the children.

The primary schools are located in a semi-arid rural area, with minimal facilities, gardens for food production, and resident cows for milk. Experience Kenya students assisted with a fencing project, planting 500 seedling trees, and building a cow shed for the resident milk cows.

Student participants answered surveys before and after the orientation, on-site in Kenya, and at the end of the study abroad program, and they developed an analytical, reflective journal and summary papers. These strategies addressed the emotional self-awareness and value that students place upon service-learning understanding of community-identified needs, and comprehension of country-specific material.

As a result, students exhibited increased comprehension of country-specific

developed a greater understanding of service and a desire to continue involvement, understood the importance to the host country for communities to identify their needs, and experienced the satisfaction of hands-on work. They learned what it meant to serve in a developing country where every day they encountered the emotional challenges of working and living with a diversity of cultures, family life situations, and economic resources. Levels of reflective thinking increased as a result of the experience, and students described the service-learning component as the highlight of the study abroad program.

As the world becomes a global community, service-learning in a developing country can advance international understanding, foster heightened cultural sensitivity and sense-of-service, and improve human conditions while also developing the leadership skills of participants. Introductory level college courses can familiarize students and offer opportunities for limited service-learning experiences. Survey results from one ISU sophomore class confirmed students' continued interests for more broad-based experiences such as Experience Kenya. Integrating service-learning in a new community as a major component of collegiate study abroad is one way to make these contributions and to develop pre-professionals with leadership skills and a sense of service to fulfill the mission of family and consumer sciences on both a local and global level.

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