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COMMUNITY SERVICE AND STUDY ABROAD

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Community Service and Study Abroad

Synopsis:

Community service can be an important part of students' study abroad learning experience. Making contacts within the host culture (schools, local chapters of US organizations, and various shelters) is a good way to get started. Getting into new cultural areas and situations helps students get a unique perspective on cultural differences that may or may not otherwise be apparent and offers them experiences of a lifetime.

Community Service and Study Abroad

Study abroad programs typically focus on students learning a foreign language and its culture. This focus tends to be an inward one which looks at what the students receive or learn and come back home with. Some study abroad programs have various types of internships that help students get out into the local surroundings to learn more about some aspect of the host culture. But again, this tends to be an inward kind of experience where students learn in an “extended” classroom setting. A third kind of focus is outward looking, doing some sort of community service while studying abroad. While some internship opportunities have an element of service, many are arranged for students to add to their range of experiences, often something that they can easily and happily add to their resumes. But other opportunities also allow students to engage in some sort of community service where they give back to their host community, and having done this, students often report this to be some of their most important learning experiences, both in personal growth and in learning about the host culture. An institution’s philosophy and goals toward community service play a large role in how it plans community service with study abroad. An institution’s culture of giving back to where its students are staying is a strong incentive for active student participation. The students in turn receive cultural feedback from their work that greatly enriches their lives. Doing community service also helps students put in perspective their own problems, but especially their own advantages that they have beyond what many people in the world have. This two-sidedness of the community service coin is one of the real benefits for students, and getting into new cultural areas and situations helps them get a true perspective on local cultural differences that may or may not otherwise be apparent.

One way to add attraction to students for these courses is to cross-list them appropriately with other courses. Generally speaking, a course is cross-listed with community service when service can enhance the curriculum or the experience of the course, and the service has to account for a minimum number of outreach hours. In study abroad settings, service is used as a way to engage students more fully with the local community, and generally, they enhance their host community, and the reciprocity is valued. If the community and the students benefit, then it’s been done well. This way, more courses can be developed with support from the community service coordinator and from the faculty. The students will appreciate credits in other areas if their community service requirement has already been met, and faculty are more likely to buy into the idea if they can see a broader picture of how community service applies to their courses. This top-down support helps strengthen the overall credibility and wide-spread acceptance of the program.

Having local contacts in the host country seems to be the best way to find opportunities for community service. One program director who did a study abroad year as a high school student maintained contacts with that host family. This in turn kept an “in” with that community which led to significant service opportunities. For example, a morning-long English teaching workshop with the local middle school students and an afternoon catastrophe training session with the local fire department and first responders were results of this personal contact. Other possibilities were found, too. One was an opportunity to work with the local Caritas organization because the community service coordinator had arranged to meet them at their outreach office to set something up. Because this study abroad program had an ongoing, permanent relationship with the host town, it was seen as a reliable and consistent provider of service. Having a local presence helps when finding service opportunities because the organizations that are asked will hopefully recognize that study broad program as a stable part of their community and be more willing to set something up.

Eco-friendly, sustainable groups are sometimes open to volunteer service opportunities. One such “feel good” firm is Green Visions of Sarajevo, a company offering sustainable tourism. It has provided contact to local groups and programs that need assistance. Some concrete examples are working with local university students on a specific project to supply English content to (US sports, for example) and helping maintain hiking paths by painting marker posts and clearing trails.

Local chapters of US organizations such as the Rotary or Lions Club can be a fruitful starting point for finding service opportunities abroad. Colleagues on the home campus who are members of any such service organizations can be very good contacts with the chapters in the host country, members of which almost certainly know of local service prospects.

Even with a local contact or permanent presence, one should map the community, that is, look around and see what is there. Schools, care centers, shelters, outreach, and support programs can often use help, even if it is help behind the scenes. Casting a wide net to find service opportunities is sometimes needed—knocking on doors, asking at schools or even approaching unlikely places: one study group stayed regularly at a hotel whose director knew the local public school director who was then contacted. A service idea was worked out (English classes) and set up for the next semester’s visit.

Local community schools often offer evening English classes. This is a good opportunity for American students to use their native language skills to help those interested in North American English and culture. Most cities have shelters for youth and the homeless, animal shelters, under-funded and understaffed schools, etc. These groups can often use extra help. Another place to find local contacts is a local “job fair” or similar public event where the locals see what is available to them. This can be a good place to get ideas of where and what might be offered as community service. Many students are interested in animals and are willing to help out in a shelter for neglected or abused animals. Even in “wealthier nations” where one might think community service would be unneeded or unwanted, youth and homeless shelters are unfortunately always to be found, and help is often needed here. Seeking out and accepting opportunities that challenge the students’ comfort zone often yield the most rewarding service opportunities.

Variations on projects can also open doors. Instead of offering to teach English or American sports, for example, offer to practice. Groups may very well respond positively to an offer to help expand and strengthen an existing program rather than instituting a new program.

Sometimes offering a group’s time and service in “far-fetched situations” achieves something of value, too. One group contacted Mauthausen Concentration Camp Memorial in Austria to ask if there was any opportunity for community service. One of the outreach coordinators responded a few days later saying that yes, there was. It seems that during the previous summer, heavy rains had caused some damage that required repairs, and in the course of the repairs, ashes had been uncovered. After analysis confirmed that they were human ashes, it was decided to bury them on site, and they wanted someone to organize and conduct an appropriate burial ceremony. The students involved (some carried urns filled with ashes, some lighted and held memorial candles, some read words of remembrance, some placed the urns into the prepared gravesite, some stood and offered silent respect for the those being buried) were truly astonished by this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and experience to serve victims of the Holocaust and to offer community service. One never knows what may happen.

Larger projects usually take longer to arrange, plan, and carry out, taking up to three months to organize, especially with larger groups of volunteers taking part. Smaller projects and groups can be arranged in less time, but good planning and preparation cannot be rushed, so starting early is essential for successful service. From a logistical standpoint, walking to the service site is much more practical than arranging rides or paying for public transportation. This is not always possible, but it can simplify things for the student volunteers.

Staying involved and actively in contact with possible service recipients is key to finding service opportunities, but of course their possible “no” should be respected. But leaving it at “Sure, we should talk about that sometime” can let a lead grow cold. Any interest should be pursued with those contacted.

Community service can be an important addition to students’ study abroad learning experience, providing some of their most important and memorable experiences while abroad. Having local contacts in the host culture such as schools, eco-friendly enterprises, local chapters of US organizations, and various shelters is a good way to get started. Getting into new cultural areas and situations helps students get a unique perspective on local cultural differences that may or may not otherwise be apparent and offers them the experience of a lifetime.

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