

SERVICE LEARNING OVERSEAS: A NEW & EXCITING OPTION

Susan A. Bird

International volunteer experiences have existed for over a century, starting most likely with missionaries. The Peace Corps, Habitat for Humanity, Crossroads Africa, Earthwatch, the Red Cross, and other organizations are current examples of valuable international volunteer efforts.

For an understanding of the term Service Learning, we can turn to the "granddaddy" of the genre, Partnership for Service Learning, which has provided opportunities for over 1,000 students since 1982. Their underlying belief is that by combining formal study and service to the local community, students will experience learning with greater depth and meaning. It is this combination of study and learning (together with the credit-bearing aspect of the programs) which differentiates Service Learning from other kinds of service experience.

The organizers of any service learning project want the community service to be serious, useful, and substantive, demanding a commitment from and utilizing the skills of participants. The academic study should focus on the culture in which the student finds him/herself, and should be evaluated as well as taught by academic personnel and awarded credit by sponsoring colleges or universities. Service learning projects vary widely, ranging from caring for disabled children in a hospital to assisting rural villages in laying sewer lines. In general, the work is oriented towards helping people.

In some programs, students receive up to a full course load of credits for service learning experiences. In other cases, as with internships, the student's program may include some class work, and some service learning credits; the class work is inevitably linked to the service learning. There are no hard-and-fast guidelines for eligibility.

The general concept of service learning in America

received a huge boost in the late 1980s and early 1990s when colleges began to worry about turning out graduates in the "me first" generation. Debates ensued in which colleges attempted to define the extent to which they needed to promote the concept of service along with the more traditional education they offered. Many colleges developed local service learning projects and, perhaps equally

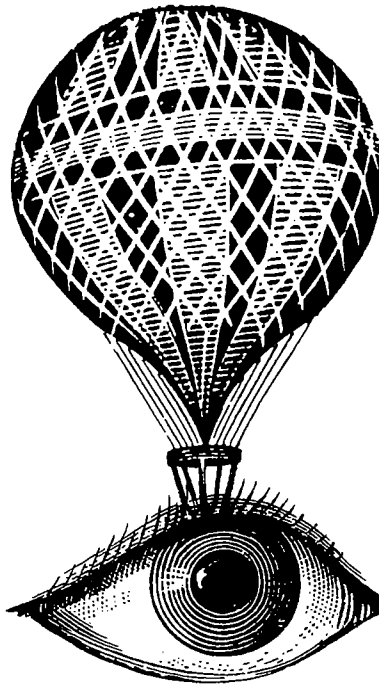
importantly for the future of international service learning, established ways of validating and crediting that experience. Once students could receive credit for working in local service learning projects, it was not a great stretch to have international service learning accepted as well.

Service learning is NOT an opportunity to "convey" culture, or bring the "benefits" of the high-tech U.S. society to people who live in a simpler world. Mutual respect between students and their hosts is essential to the success of service learning programs and this assumption is incorporated into the most successful service learning projects.

Students who wish to study in developing countries may find that there is a greater number and variety of service learning projects available than traditional study abroad programs. Where once they might have spent a summer volunteering in some capacity, or waited until after graduation to join the Peace Corps, now they can advance their undergraduate degree and combine their academic work and the service aspect of living abroad. Students preparing for a career in

many professions—social work, psychology, counseling, nursing, public health, international development, or education—may find that their education is tremendously enhanced by this experience.

It should be noted that service learning projects are not restricted to the part of the world commonly labeled as "developing." Schools and organizations sponsor service learning projects in Western Europe, Israel, and the



S T U D Y
A B R O A D

U.S., where work with an Indian nation is characterized as international experience.

It is also true that in general, a service learning program will cost less than a traditional study abroad program sponsored by the same or a similar institution, but it is not free or even inexpensive. It is very time-consuming and labor-intensive to structure service learning experiences that are truly useful to students. Some colleges that award credit for service learning require the student to pay the full-time tuition at home while paying the living and administrative costs of their program abroad. Other service learning programs are financial bargains, so it pays to investigate as many organizations as possible and ask detailed questions about the cost of the programs if money is an issue.

As with internships, the participant is first and foremost a student and is assumed to be learning during his/her experience. The student is clearly not a professional relief worker. This student status allows the participant to seek the simplest visa.

If a student's own institution offers service learning abroad, this is the easiest route, as acceptance of credits is assured. Applying to organizations that specialize in service learning may help a student who is seeking to obtain credits when his/her campus does not sponsor programs. Many colleges and universities that sponsor service learning programs do permit other students to enroll. In such cases, it may be a matter of transferring credits back to the student's home campus. However, it is advisable for the student to do a good bit of research to be certain that the credits will be accepted. Schools that do not sponsor service learning are often hesitant to award credit for the experience or may lack a mechanism to do so.

Following is a list of organizations and colleges which is a sampling of the many opportunities that are available in service learning. Their inclusion is not intended to indicate an endorsement of them over others. Interested parties are advised to contact these organizations directly for additional information:

The Partnership for Service Learning

815 Second Avenue, Suite 315
New York, NY 10017-4594
tel.: (212) 986-0989
fax: (212) 986-5039

PSL offers summer and full semester programs in a variety of settings, currently including Ecuador, England, France, India, Israel, Jamaica, Mexico, the Philippines, Scotland, and South Dakota, with new sites under development. While colleges and universities are encouraged to become members of the partnership, students from non-member institutions are readily accepted.

Worldwide Internships and Service Education / WISE

Pittsburgh, PA
tel.: (412) 681-8120

fax: (412) 681-8187
e-mail: wise+@pitt.edu

WISE offers a variety of service learning projects abroad. Working alongside social service professionals in one or more ongoing projects in the British Isles, students are placed in hospitals, hostels, day care centers, group homes, or shelters. Students must arrange credit with their home campuses.

The Council on International Educational Exchange/CIEE publishes: *Volunteer! The Comprehensive Guide to Voluntary Service in the U.S. and Abroad*, which may be ordered through CIEE at 205 E. 42nd St., New York, NY 10017. CIEE itself sponsors a number of short-term service opportunities in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. All projects have a learning component. Students will need to negotiate with their own campuses to obtain academic credit for the experience; however, CIEE's sponsorship of the projects may facilitate this process.

Transitions Abroad often publishes information about volunteering opportunities. The student may need to do some work at her/his home campus to see that credit can be earned for the experience.

Tel.: (413) 256-3414

University of North Carolina at Charlotte offers a summer program of community service and enrichment in Scotland. Students serve at a community training center for adults with disabilities. Students from outside UNCC are accepted into the program. For additional information:

Elizabeth Adams
Director of International Education
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
tel.: (704) 547-2464
fax: (704) 547-3168
e-mail: eaadams@email.uncc.edu

Service Learning In Africa is sponsored by SUNY College of Technology at Canton and SUNY Potsdam. The seven-week summer program assigns students to various countries in West Africa and East Africa. Service programs are designed and hosted by Operation Crossroads Africa (OCA), which has over 35 years of experience and has sent over 10,000 participants to 35 African countries. Course work is also involved, with students earning 3-7 credit hours. Students participate in group-oriented cultural exchange and community development projects, which typically involve physical labor using indigenous resources. Contact:

Professor Lora G. Lunt
Director of International Education
SUNY Potsdam, Potsdam, NY 13676
(315) 267-2792/2793
e-mail: luntlg@potsdam.edu

Susan A. Bird is Executive Director, Consortium for International Education in Irvine, California