

## **Alternative Spring Break Jamaica! Service Learning and Civic Engagement in a Developing Country**

*...although college is only one phase in any individual's lifelong process of moral and civic development, it can be pivotal, leading to new ways of understanding the world and one's place in the world, providing new frameworks through which later experiences are interpreted, and equipping the individual with a wide array of capacities for moral and civic engagement. (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003, p. xii)*

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### **Abstract**

This article features the work of an interdisciplinary faculty collaborative project that involved 35 university students who participated in a week long spring break service learning trip to the island of Jamaica. Details regarding the planning process are highlighted. A section is included on the experiences of students, student outcomes, and faculty assessment of how outcomes were met. Finally, a section on lessons learned for university faculty who are interested in developing similar experiential learning experiences for students is provided for future planning efforts.

### **Introduction**

Authors have supported the benefits for university students involved in international service-learning projects (Button, Green, Tengnah, Johansson, & Baker, 2005; Urraca, Ledoux, & Harris, 2009). By engaging in international immersion projects, consciousness of students with regard to cultural diversity is greatly increased, as well as promotion of personal growth (Caffrey, Neander, Markle, & Stewart, 2005). Other meaningful benefits of service learning include enhancing the student's experience while attending a university and gaining insight for selection of the right vocation. Furthermore, service learning and civic engagement activities include the development of attitudes and skills related to self and societal reflection, transformational learning, confidence and leadership (Bamber & Hankin, 2011). Establishing a meaningful international service learning experience in higher education is based on effective faculty collaboration in planning intentional, focused, and transformative learning experiences (McKinnon & Fealy, 2011).

An interdisciplinary/intercollege team of faculty from Western Carolina University (WCU) embarked on a journey of engaged teaching and learning for the 2011-2012 academic

year. Specifically, the faculty group chose to engage students in an experiential learning trip to the island of Jamaica over spring break. WCU has a long standing relationship with the people of Jamaica. Over the last 40 years, thousands of teachers with a teaching diploma from a British system of education have completed a four-year baccalaureate degree through Western's program on the island. With many alumni on the island, and the campus-wide emphasis on issues related to poverty, our project took shape early in the academic year. Our faculty group had never worked together before, but we were able to quickly create a strong team because we shared a common set of values about the role of experiential learning for college students, as well as a common belief in the transformative power of living in a developing country for a week.

This article provides a review of the trip, beginning with the planning process. Then, we discuss the experience itself: what students did and learned while living and working in a developing country for one week. The third section discusses student learning outcomes and our assessment of learning experiences. The fourth section provides a set of lessons learned from the perspective of the faculty supervisors. Our hope is that the article will provide both an inspiration for faculty considering similar international service-learning opportunities, as well as some helpful advice for the planning and implementation of such experiences.

### **The Planning Process**

WCU has very specific guidelines for endorsement or sponsorship of travel experiences for college students. Each student who was approved to participate had to register for a course designated as a travel course, as well as complete an approval process through the campus community ethics committee. Since all students were not enrolled in the same course, we scheduled orientation sessions, one per month. Sessions included speakers who had taught in WCU's Jamaica teacher education program or had lived in Jamaica. Students were grouped by major and required to create a presentation for the entire group on various topics related to Jamaica's culture, political structure, health issues, economic challenges, etc. Also included in one session was the topic of being a guest in another country and the importance of respecting their values, beliefs, and traditions.

The preparation of the budget for the trip was a critical step in the planning process. For this trip, we had a total of 35 students, which enabled the university to fund six faculty members to supervise and assist with various service and civic engagement activities in Jamaica. The most intensive part of the planning process was maintaining regular contact with agencies and school personnel on the island. Ultimately, this became one of the primary learning experiences for all of us. Life in developing countries does not operate at the speed to which Americans are accustomed. We had to maintain our perspective that living and working in a developing country for a week would be a transformative experience for our students, regardless of the unexpected changes to our pre-departure itinerary.

### **The Experience: Kingston Group**

Visiting with students and teachers in Jamaican schools allowed our students to better understand the challenges of providing an education in poverty stricken places, including a lack of teaching materials and places to store them, as well as overcrowded classrooms. We wanted the students to grapple with the problem of low morale in schools, the problem of under-qualified teachers, the lack of appropriate services for children with disabilities, and the stigma in society of being a child or having a child with special needs.

Students also grappled firsthand with issues of poverty they had discussed in other classes and on campus through the poverty project. Through this trip, students were able to actually experience these “textbook” concepts at a realistic and often heart wrenching level. The young adults who participated in this trip now clearly understand that poverty means powerlessness and the lack of ability to control one’s destiny. Students experienced the true helplessness that many Jamaicans feel in their own country.

In addition, students experienced community development through their exposure to Non- Government Organizations (NGOs) and church supported social programs in the country. The lack of income creation opportunities for citizens in the country further impacted students. This experience was transformational for some of our students and has led a few of them to research possible internship opportunities in Jamaica or other developing nations. Finally, the opportunity to personally and meaningfully interact with members of the Jamaican society allowed students a glimpse of the oppression and real world challenges faced by their fellow global citizens. We believe students now have a lifelong reference point that transcends any theoretical or academic experience offered in our traditional classroom curriculum.

### **The Experience: St. Elizabeth Group**

Students who went to St. Elizabeth shared a common nursing major, and as a result, their learning outcomes focused more on their future career goals. Notwithstanding this fact, these students also learned much of what we have already discussed regarding the plight of developing countries.

Fulfilling many components of the nursing degree’s focus on community health, the trip allowed students to see the differences between nursing care in the US and in Jamaica, the differences between medical and drug supplies in the US and Jamaica, and to compare and contrast the different types of facilities where patients receive care or are institutionalized. These lessons were made more concrete to students as they helped deliver critical medical supplies to homebound patients.

Another important lesson for our nursing students involved appropriate cultural care. The trip helped students recognize and respect cultural difference and see how important it is to provide care appropriate to and with respect for those differences.

While providing health education at four rural clinics in St. Elizabeth, students experienced many of those cultural differences firsthand.

While performing eye exams for preschoolers, the students were also impacted by the hopelessness experienced by families lacking adequate finances. Many Jamaican parents struggle to buy food and pay bills; thus, buying glasses for children with vision issues is often impossible. The emotional frustrations of living in poverty, experienced by many Jamaicans, were also experienced by the students.

For all of our students, both in Kingston and in St. Elizabeth, the trip allowed for personal and professional development. They developed more global awareness and global citizenship. Ultimately, our goal was to design a transformative experience that would lead to a change in behavior of our students in response to what they learned. Students remarked on the flight home their lives would never be the same, and that they would look for opportunities to return to Jamaica and to be more involved in helping those in need.

### **Student Outcomes and Lessons Learned**

In our assessment, the trip was a success. As Table 1 indicates, our students' experiences in Jamaica lined up perfectly with the learning outcomes developed by the WCU poverty project steering committee. Aligning our trip with this university-wide initiative increased the institutional buy-in and support for our endeavor.

The poverty project outlined four core outcomes it hoped students would achieve:

1. to develop a more comprehensive intellectual and emotional understanding of the global causes and consequences of poverty;
2. to work collaboratively across disciplines in global communities with faculty, staff, and community partners;
3. to contribute to potential solutions to poverty-related issues through participation in community service-learning events;
4. to take action through participation in a real world poverty-focused project.

The post-trip evaluation was open-ended and students reflected on the experience in writing, as well as in small group discussions. Their comments lined up remarkably well with the learning outcomes. Students grappled with the causes and consequences of poverty by visiting schools, orphanages, health clinics, etc... Their reflections noted the complex and interconnected realities of poverty. They noted the impact of education systems, debt, corruption, and globalization on the process of development in Jamaica.

Additionally, the trip was intentionally designed to be interdisciplinary. Students reflected on the broad array of academic interests within the group, noting how they learned from the perspectives of one another. By staying together in Kingston, the 17 students from 9 different majors each brought a unique perspective to the agencies, contributing to a broader understanding of the issues faced by a developing country.

Table 1

*Student Outcomes: Kingston and St. Elizabeth*

<b>WCU Poverty Project Outcomes<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Activities Supporting Outcome and Student Quotations Demonstrating Outcome Success</b>		
<p>Develop a more comprehensive intellectual and emotional (empathetic) understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty-related issues, both global and local, as well as what they can do about them, from the consideration perspectives informed by their own disciplines and those of others via traditional classroom teaching and learning, participation in student clubs and organizations with poverty-focused activities, and service with community partners.</p>	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p><u>Activities in Kingston</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visiting schools, orphanage, home for unwed mothers, public health clinic</li> <li>• Speaking with staff and clients of each site</li> <li>• Living in and traveling around Jamaica for a week</li> </ul> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p><u>Activities in St. Elizabeth</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performing eye exams and teaching daily hygiene at schools</li> <li>• Visiting schools</li> <li>• Observing, participating, and teaching in health clinics</li> <li>• Developing therapeutic relationships with staff at each site</li> </ul> </td> </tr> </table> <p><i>"It is difficult to get a proper education especially because the country's focus is generally not in that direction due to other economic factors. Education is the key to success and without that key, the door cannot be unlocked and the country will have a much more difficult time prospering." - T.D.</i></p> <p><i>"I also think of extreme debt that can be accrued by developing countries due to IMF and World Bank loans as well as a severe lack of infrastructure such as decent roads, hospitals, and schools." - M.C.</i></p> <p><i>"Corruption within the government is a road block for many developing countries. In Jamaica we saw corruption when we toured [one of the poorer neighborhoods]. While in the tour we were informed that the roads in this neighborhood were well kept in order to ensure that the neighborhood voted for a particular party." - M.P.</i></p> <p><i>"Much as many other semi-periphery countries, Jamaica has a small portion of its people who are wealthy and the vast majority living in poverty" - E.J.</i></p>	<p><u>Activities in Kingston</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visiting schools, orphanage, home for unwed mothers, public health clinic</li> <li>• Speaking with staff and clients of each site</li> <li>• Living in and traveling around Jamaica for a week</li> </ul>	<p><u>Activities in St. Elizabeth</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performing eye exams and teaching daily hygiene at schools</li> <li>• Visiting schools</li> <li>• Observing, participating, and teaching in health clinics</li> <li>• Developing therapeutic relationships with staff at each site</li> </ul>
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<p>Work collaboratively across disciplines and in local and global communities with faculty, staff, and community partners (including through advocacy) with individuals from a variety of philosophical, religious, socio-economic, and other backgrounds; some may choose to integrate projects they engage in, into their electronic briefcases for future presentation.</p>	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p><u>Activities in Kingston</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The very nature of this trip is interdisciplinary, with faculty from four disciplines and students from nine majors.</li> <li>• At each location, students learned from one another, each sharing some specific knowledge and perspective from their own major and course of study.</li> </ul> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p><u>Activities in St. Elizabeth</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working collaboratively with the nurses and various health care professionals in the clinics and teachers in the schools.</li> <li>• Attending a church service and speaking to people in the area regarding their religious beliefs.</li> </ul> </td> </tr> </table>	<p><u>Activities in Kingston</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The very nature of this trip is interdisciplinary, with faculty from four disciplines and students from nine majors.</li> <li>• At each location, students learned from one another, each sharing some specific knowledge and perspective from their own major and course of study.</li> </ul>	<p><u>Activities in St. Elizabeth</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working collaboratively with the nurses and various health care professionals in the clinics and teachers in the schools.</li> <li>• Attending a church service and speaking to people in the area regarding their religious beliefs.</li> </ul>
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<sup>1</sup> Our thanks to Professor John Whitmire and Jennifer Cooper, co-chairs of the poverty project steering committee, as well as all members of the committee. The poverty project's great success – and these outcomes – are products of their hard work.

WCU Poverty Project Outcomes	Activities Supporting Outcome and Student Quotations Demonstrating Outcome Success	
<p>Contribute to potential solutions to poverty-related issues in theoretical and practical terms through participation in scholarly and creative activities (via discipline and course-specific approaches, as well as focused undergraduate and graduate research), service-learning, and student organization events.</p>	<p><u>Activities in Kingston</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With each experience in Jamaica, students constructed individually theoretical frameworks around the issues of poverty they faced, which we hope ultimately leads to construction of potential solutions.</li> </ul> <p><i>"You really have to employ the 'teach a man to fish' concept with these countries. Too often, our aid programs have turned these countries into being severely dependent on foreign benefactors." - E.J.</i></p> <p><i>"Education is the number one way to help someone, whether it be how to farm using the resources that they already have or on how to make clothes so that they would have something to sell. If you educate someone, you can provide them with a lifetime of knowledge." - T.C.</i></p> <p><i>"Health care teams can make a huge difference. They can educate Jamaican health care workers and help provide resources." - B.C.</i></p>	<p><u>Activities in St. Elizabeth</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As part of senior service learning project focused on HIV/AIDS education, students developed and prepared practical ways of presenting the information, accounting for the impact of poverty on the topic.</li> <li>• Students from the student organization, Nurses Christian Fellowship, prepared stories and craft activities for local schools.</li> </ul>
<p>Take action through participation in real-world, poverty-focused projects and initiatives – including advocacy and civic engagement projects – with relevance to the content and skills of their own majors and vocational goals, as well as the lives of informed and responsible citizen content, meet community needs, develop career-related skills, and become responsible citizens. We collaborate with faculty, staff, students, and community partners to promote engagement, foster civic responsibility, and encourage academic excellence.</p>	<p><u>Activities in Kingston</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students spent one day with the Peace Corps office in Kingston, learning about some concrete ways they could participate in poverty-reduction initiatives.</li> <li>• Throughout, students were completing this outcome: the entire trip was a participation in the real world of poverty projects.</li> </ul> <p><i>"Though I have travelled all over the world, Jamaica was my favorite experience. This has everything to do with the participants and who we encountered. Jamaica, despite the economic hardships, is a warm and inviting country." - E.J.</i></p> <p><i>"This educational experience was top notch! Experiences such as this for our young college students being exposed to other cultures and other world views." - C.F. (Doctoral student in educational leadership, who was one of our graduate student participants)</i></p>	<p><u>Activities in St. Elizabeth</u></p> <p>Students, whether in clinics, nursing home, schools, private homes, or hostel, participated in projects that revolved around poverty issues.</p>

Solutions to poverty are hard to come by, but our students demonstrated a sophisticated appreciation of Jamaica's challenges and needs. The service-learning design of our trip allowed students to be on the ground and think about problem solving rather than sit back in an ivory tower classroom thinking abstractly about solutions. In their reflections they noted the importance of education and sustainable development project that – as one student noted – “teach a man to fish.”

Finally, students took action. Throughout the trip students participated in real-world projects, collaborating with NGOs and professionals on the ground to develop a stronger sense of global citizenship and foster a deeper sense of civic responsibility.

Students learned a great deal in Jamaica, but we identified several areas where student learning could be improved. Most importantly, we did not reserve enough time for structured reflection during the trip. The realities and logistics of getting students to and from the NGOs and agencies were more time-consuming than we had anticipated. Our intention was to have time each evening for reflection, but that time slipped away. In the future, we will reserve an hour or two in the morning to reflect on the previous day's activity. This will give students time to process their experiences from the previous day without forgetting the salient details.

Additionally, we did not require a final paper or project from our students, in large part because they were taking a 1-credit travel course. Ideally, a trip of this magnitude would correspond with a 3-credit course and culminate in a research paper and presentation. Having a journal as the final product was fruitful, but a research paper would add significant academic content and rigor to the experience.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the trip resulted in extraordinary student learning. We are convinced of the importance and value of this kind of international service-learning trip. This paper shows how this type of trip aids in student development, both personally and professionally, and the resulting shift of world view such experiences offer. We encourage other faculty to work collaboratively, across disciplines, to design similar opportunities for experiential learning for their students.

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## About the Authors

**Cheryl Clark** received her ADN from the University of Indianapolis in 1968, her BSN from the University of Evansville in 1975, and her MSN from California State University in LA in 1981. She has worked in medical/surgical units, cardiac stepdown units, and long term care. For the past 13 years, she has been a nurse educator at WCU, working primarily in medical-surgical and mental health classes. She is certified in Faith Community Nursing. Her interests include spiritual care of patients and international nursing. She can be reached at [cclark@email.wcu.edu](mailto:cclark@email.wcu.edu).

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**Rebecca Lasher** After receiving her graduate degree from the University of Tennessee in 1985, Rebecca Lasher worked in clinical social work for 23 years specializing in counseling with children and adolescents. Her years of experience in the field led her to the current position of Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work at Western Carolina University in 2008. As a former school social worker, her interests include poverty and how it impacts children in the educational environment. She was a member of the WCU Poverty Project committee during the 2011-12 academic year. Her service at Western Carolina also includes involvement on the Faculty Senate as the elected secretary and facilitating Intergroup Dialogues with students. She can be reached at [rlasher@email.wcu.edu](mailto:rlasher@email.wcu.edu).

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