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Leena Karsan

Grand Valley State University

Annie Hakim

Grand Valley State University

Janaan Decker

Grand Valley State University, deckejan@gvsu.edu

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Honors in Ghana: How Study Abroad Enriches Students' Lives

LEENA KARSAN, ANNIE HAKIM, AND JANAAN DECKER
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

Study abroad programs are taking on a new role in curricula and strategic planning in our colleges and universities today. Carolyn Haynes lists a number of “key indicators” for consideration in developing study abroad programs that set the stage for students’ deep learning and personal development. This essay supports her viewpoint and looks more closely at two of the key indicators, meaningful engagement and critical reflection, and how they are linked with students’ academic learning and personal development in study abroad programs. We will demonstrate this link using the example of a student-initiated and team-oriented study abroad program in Ghana that we have developed at Grand Valley State University.

The theoretical contexts of our Ghana program have both prepared us for our experiences and validated them. In Kuh’s research on the effects of high-impact educational practices, he notes that “student development is a cumulative process shaped by many events and experiences inside and outside the classroom (13). Chickering (as cited in Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt) adds another dimension to student development that he calls “cool passion”: “Cool passion seeks a fulfillment by joining the forces of heart and mind, commitment and critical analysis. Such passion pursues its purposes with ‘tenuous tenacity’” (77). Finally, Vande Berg refers to a new student learning paradigm that influences how we approach study abroad programs: “We no longer believe that our responsibilities to our students, where their learning is concerned, end when they leave the United States” (394). This paradigm, along with Kuh’s cumulative model and Chickering’s “cool passion,” illuminate the high-impact practice of our study abroad program in Ghana.

Students in Grand Valleys’ Frederik Meijer Honors College were the driving force in developing our program. One student traveled with me to Ghana, and in the two subsequent years we had two small contingents of students who got a sense of the culture and the possibilities of study there so they could help us shape the program. Now we have a group of nineteen students, one faculty, and two staff members headed back to Ghana in 2011, where we are offering an interdisciplinary study abroad program that links a three-credit social science course with a service-learning practicum. This study abroad

program is unique in several ways. First, it is a student-led initiative. Second, the program offers a learner-centered education; it provides an environment where students focus not only on what but how they learn in a new culture, integrating student learning and student development to create seamless learning. Third, the program is interdisciplinary and collaborative, with students, faculty, and staff participating across the disciplines.

Our 2009 experience in Ghana provides a glimpse of the kind of experience we provide for our students. Six honors students and I went to Ghana to explore possible partnerships for sustainable projects. We had agreed to work together as a team, which meant that any decisions or concerns would be discussed with everyone. Prior to our departure, a group of missionaries approached us to partner with them to help build a hydroponic farming system for Ghanaians in the Northern region and to build huts at the mission's training center. We decided this would be an opportune time to initiate a sustainable program that would create a tradition of sending Grand Valley students each year to participate in service activities with a goal of helping Ghanaians develop thriving and sustainable communities.

In one of many surprises, detours, and mishaps, we found that our missionaries were not ready for us, so instead we changed diapers, taught math and English, painted the girls' and boys' bedrooms, played soccer with the children, and learned a little Dutch and the Gonja dialect. More importantly, we soon found that the values of this missionary group were not consistent with our own, and so we came to consensus on a new option: we would travel back down to Southern Ghana to spend the remainder of our trip with a Ghanaian run anti-child trafficking organization called Challenging Heights. For two weeks, we worked with children who had been either rescued from slavery or were at high risk of being trafficked. At times, we were overwhelmed with the poverty and overcome with heartache. Through those darkest moments, the children taught us to look beyond the limited tangible world and experience life in a very different form.

We came to realize that the service component of our trip was not necessarily to help "solve" the problem of child trafficking. Rather, we could best help by providing the human capital (volunteerism) to implement solutions already outlined by Ghanaian non-profit leaders like those we were working with at Challenging Heights. When we returned from Ghana, the students became significantly engaged in a number of programs. Examples of their involvement include developing programs to raise awareness about child trafficking in their living centers, sharing their experiences with incoming freshmen and at pre-professional seminars, organizing a campus-wide school supply drive, recruiting students for the following year's trip, and developing an

annotated bibliography of potential readings for the college's service-learning initiative.

The following summer in 2010, two living center directors, seven students, and I traveled to Ghana to take a look at several service-learning sites, meet with faculty at the University of Ghana to discuss a study abroad program, and to work with Challenging Heights to explore service-learning opportunities for students. Members of our group helped develop sustainable methods for women to produce palm oil and grind cassava; initiated a clean water project and organized fund raising programs to purchase thirty water filters and have them shipped to Ghana; partnered with GVSU faculty to research bio-sand filters and how to maintain them; and generated lasting relationships with chiefs, government officials, and non-profit leaders in the region who have continued to sustain and expand the development of the community in which the filters were installed.

One of our goals on this trip was to bring together the final components for a formal program proposal, and the students' involvement was key in developing the coursework at the University of Ghana and linking it to service experiences. At the same time, the students set the precedent for the kind of meaningful engagement and critical reflection that Haynes described and that we affirm as key values. Casey Key, a premed honors student, stated, "I did not learn from books, rather, I learned from a community. I learned that there are places where people and community are valued over individualism and capitalist ideals. I confirmed that America is not always right, and neither is Ghana." Amanda Clark, a women's studies major, said that "being a global citizen means recognizing that the world is larger than your individual reality; it's respecting other ways of life and acknowledging the educational opportunity available to all when you are open to engage in conversations. It's dismissing the claims that your way of life is the only way of life." Annie Hakim remarked, "These experiences will teach me to not only look through the eyes of others, but to recreate the way I see the world through my own eyes." These comments illustrate the "cool passion," the combination of engagement and reflection, that we hope will continue to characterize our study abroad program in Ghana.

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The authors may be contacted at
deckejan@gvsu.edu.