

## Avoiding Collateral Damage: Education Abroad Programs and Their Impacts on Host Communities

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Institutions committed to the ethical practice of education abroad must make serious efforts to work with all stakeholders—including faculty critical of current education abroad—to understand the effects that programs have on host communities and to develop and implement best practices that mitigate those impacts.

We offer some general principles to frame the challenge:

- Education abroad programs will impact communities. Many of the effects of the programs are unintended and indirect. Most of them will also be unseen by program participants and their academic institutions. Some are unavoidable.
- Program leaders must know the places they are going well, or work with people in the host countries that do, and be aware that there are always variations and inequalities within every place.
- Local people need to be consulted and prepared for the incursion of students, and will also learn from the education abroad program—for good or ill. They should have input into the program's development.
- Students and program leaders must be aware of their own cultural and material experiences, which will shape their understanding of community impacts.
- Institutions should consider refraining from education abroad programs to areas that may be particularly vulnerable or where the impacts might be too hard to evaluate. Policies as rigorous as those used in institutional review board (IRB) evaluations for research should be implemented for education abroad.

We have found that the impacts of education abroad on host communities fall into three general categories; environmental, economic, and social or cultural. A few examples will help illustrate the categories and the complexity of the issues.

### ENVIRONMENTAL

Students and program leaders bring their own understanding of the environment and how it should be cared for (or not). These ideas are both culturally and class-based. Students are not necessarily knowledgeable about how the environment is affected by everyday activities. Several years ago, one of us was coleading a course in the Indian Himalaya. A dozen or so students, instructors, and drivers were loaded on an old school bus. They drove most of the day, slowly gaining elevation. Everyone was jet lagged, tired, and hot. Faculty encouraged students to drink water. The only available water was bottled, and quickly a large pile of empty plastic bottles accumulated in the bus. As the afternoon wore on, the heat became less oppressive, and gorgeous views of the Himalaya appeared. The group stopped for a snack and more water in a picturesque mountain village. The bus driver suggested that the day's trash be gathered up. The students dutifully filled a plastic garbage bag with the empty water bottles and other trash. They loaded back into the bus and headed off, making the final

push to camp for the night. As the bus left the village and rounded the first switchback, the driver took the plastic trash bag and flung it out the open bus door.

The students were horrified, of course. That night's debriefing addressed the fate of that bag of trash as a recurring theme. It provided an excellent opportunity to talk about the program's environmental impact on the destination and preconceived ideas about how waste should be managed. Bottled water is often the only safe drinking water available. Trash thrown from a bus into the beautiful Himalaya is visible. The same trash taken away and placed in a landfill is not. Both affect the environment. One may or may not be better than the other. Either way, impacts on the local environment are unavoidable. Trash is created and resources are used.

## **ECONOMIC**

The most common assumption among program leaders we have spoken with is that the economic impact of education abroad is positive because money is spent in the community. Money is assuredly spent—by local standards, sometimes a lot of money (see Tompson, et al.). But the distributional impacts of that money, gifts, and even student volunteer work, can be profound. If students stay at hotels owned by foreign corporations, it is much less beneficial to local communities. If money goes to a local person who is already well-off, social and income inequalities are exacerbated. But who else owns a place with spare rooms? And isn't a basic level of material comfort required for a good learning environment and safety? On the other hand, staying in the poor housing most people in a vulnerable community live in can be a serious learning experience as well.

In one education abroad program to Latin America, students were staying in a small village that had three tiny stores selling sodas and snacks. Because only a few of the students spoke Spanish (and there is safety in numbers!), for the first few days every student ended up going to just one of the little stores. Once the program leader pointed out how this contributed to serious economic inequality in how they were affecting the village, students distributed themselves among the three stores every day. Even then, economic impacts would not be equally distributed, because it was somewhat better off families that owned stores.

Students also gave gifts to the people they were staying with, and not to everyone in the village. How did this affect the community, especially over time?

## **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL**

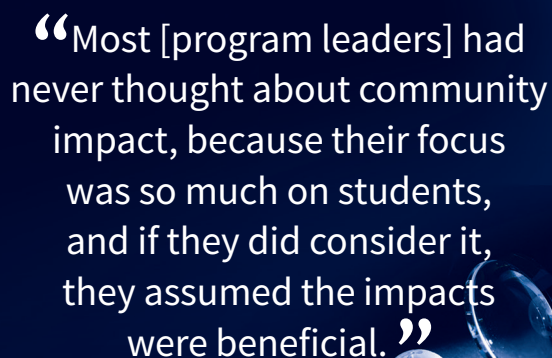
Social and cultural impacts are among the most difficult to evaluate and address. The demonstration effects of money, privilege, and possessions can drive local youth to disrespect or become dissatisfied enough to leave their communities. Even long-term, informed, and reciprocal relationships between program leaders and host communities are no guarantee that negative impacts will be prevented. Sometimes the long-term relationships even create problems by promoting dependency.

One education abroad program from our campus had been led for many years by a faculty member with deep knowledge and experience in the area to which he was going; he met the community first as a Peace Corps volunteer when he was in his teens, and maintained the relationship until his retirement from the university. He was close friends with people in the community, and was both liked and respected. He was careful to distribute students and their spending across the community as much as possible, and asked students to bring very little. Much of what they brought was contributed to the community as a whole, going to the local school or ongoing development projects.

Despite these precautions, our colleague became increasingly uncomfortable with what he saw happening because of his relationship with the community. More and more, the community began to defer to him, waiting to make decisions until they got his input. They began to count on the inflow of money that he brought, either through education abroad programs or through fundraising. Though the community had been a major focus of organizing and grassroots social change when he first went there, they were increasingly dependent (or believed themselves to be) on him. He tried reducing the number of program trips to every other year, but eventually stopped them altogether. He hopes the community can recover its independence.

## CAMPUS CONVERSATIONS

About 10 years ago, a few people at our university started discussing, presenting, and writing about the impacts of education abroad on host communities. At the time this was a relatively new conversation in education abroad circles. Responses were both inspiring and humbling. In focus groups with faculty and staff who led education abroad programs, our questions revealed that most had not thought



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about host communities before they took students there, but an array of experiences and concerns were brought up once the topic was raised. Some who had gone to communities in “nontraditional” destinations agonized about what their programs might have done to the people there. At presentations to education abroad professionals, responses were much the same. Most had never thought about community impact, because their focus was so much on students, and if they did consider it, they assumed the impacts were beneficial. Once we pointed out some of the problems, everyone got it, everyone wanted to do better, and everyone asked the same question: What should we DO?

“It’s complicated” is not a very satisfying answer, still less “WE don’t know!,” but both are true. It’s an issue that needs many minds working together. Every conversation we have had with program leaders,

faculty with relevant expertise, and education abroad professionals teaches us more. Critical scholarship on tourism has also been an important resource.<sup>1</sup>

We know that many program leaders and vendors work to mitigate the impacts of their education abroad programs on host communities. We know also that knowledgeable faculty are deeply concerned about the education abroad practices of universities. These concerns are expressed in tangible ways:

- When building budgets, program leaders build in the purchase of carbon offsets for their students’ plane flights.
- In response to requests by community leaders, program leaders ask students not to smoke in front of local people, especially youth.
- Program participants try to use locally owned hotels or spread students among several village households for homestays.
- Program leaders encourage students to limit what they bring and spend in poor communities. Student gear used hiking into remote locations may be the equivalent of a year’s income for several local families.

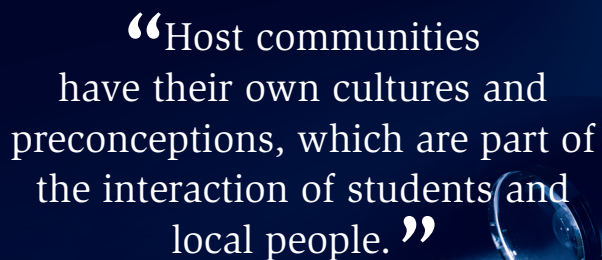
What is often lacking is the knowledge base to make changes that will consistently improve the impacts of education abroad programs on communities, not only in programs led by faculty with expertise in the area, but throughout all programs.

## WHAT DO COMMUNITIES LEARN?

Many insights about host communities become more visible once we begin thinking about their relationships with education abroad programs. Probably the most important is that there is not one homogenous community, though we tend to speak as though there is. This is an important lesson for students, but also relevant to the impact of education abroad programs. This is clear with economic impacts, but may also be true for social impacts.

<sup>1</sup> While education abroad professionals work hard to distinguish what we do from tourism, on this issue the distinction is problematic. Our students are travelers to communities other than their own, and most of the major concerns on community impacts are similar. Helpful reading from this literature includes: McLaren, *Rethinking Tourism and Ecotravel* (2003); Gmelch, S., *Tourists and Tourism* (2009); Chambers, *Native Tours* (2009); Gmelch, G., *Behind the Smile* (2012); Lovelock and Lovelock, *The Ethics of Tourism* (2013); Borland and Adams, *International Volunteer Tourism* (2014); and Williams and Lew, *Tourism Geography* (2015).

Host communities have their own cultures and pre-conceptions, which are part of the interaction of students and local people. Some can be dangerous, such as the belief that American women are sexually free—making students vulnerable to sexual assault. Local attitudes about gender, race, and sexuality may not be enlightened. They may also just be different, which leads to vital discussions about cultural imperialism. Most people involved in education abroad understand the deep complexity of these issues.



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But there is another category of community “knowledge” that is less complicated. Host communities do not have the benefit of reading, debriefing, and discussing their interaction with a new culture that our students do. This can be very stressful for people, so some level of preparation and follow-up for the community is likely to be helpful. Communities often have problematic preconceptions about Americans that may or may not be countered by their experiences with our students. They may assume that everyone from the United States is rich and white. This may not be challenged by the demographics of students who go abroad. They may believe that the place they live is uninteresting, and that they have nothing to offer. Will these beliefs be reinforced or called into question by our education abroad programs? Only if we think about these questions can we achieve the best outcomes for both students and host communities.

## CONCLUSION

Much of what we hope to accomplish with education abroad is to provide an opportunity for critical and reflective thinking. Deep understanding and concern for impacts on host communities ought to be embedded into plans for internationalizing our campuses and education abroad as a whole. It is serendipitous that this is an educational process as well as an ethical one. We all have excellent students, dedicated faculty, and experienced education abroad professionals who will embrace this challenge once they are brought together to meet it.

## FOR FURTHER READING

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