

THE HEIFER PROJECT EXPERIENCE – OPENING EYES AND MINDS

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With all of the comforts American life affords, it is difficult for some students to see where inequities exist and what can be done about them. Immersion into a way of life physically and socially distant from where and how they live is one way for students to develop an understanding and compassion for other societies and to take opportunities to be a citizen leader in their own community.

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From my flannel pajamas to my down comforter, my nights are pretty comfortable. After an evening filled with family time, a book or television show, and a few chores, I go to bed with a full tummy and a rested body ready for the next day. As I sleep, the climate in my house is kept at a perfect 72°F so when morning arrives, the comfort will continue seamlessly. The day greets me with clothes and shoes for any occasion and a coat for any and every weather condition. My comfort is extreme, and, while I am not alone, I am one of the privileged. This I know.

Unfortunately, I am not sure how many, if any, of the current student body in the college in which I teach understand their level of privilege. From my conversations and observations, it seems that all too many believe that they lack privilege because they do not have a fancy car (but generally do have a car of some sort), a laptop computer, an ipod, or adventurous spring break plans. Too many it seems, see privilege as luxury instead of realizing that to have the basics is to be privileged. Ours is a spoiled society.

So how do we bring this realization to our students? Without the funds for a study abroad trip, or the selflessness and motivation for the PeaceCorps, our students rarely get the opportunity to directly experience the lack of privilege that exists throughout the world. We watch images of countries bound by famine, poverty, unsanitary conditions, and war. We know that, each and every night, children go sleep with no dinner and no bed. Although their sleeping conditions are not of what sweet dreams are made, these images typically stay out of our sight and out of our minds. What are we to do?

The Higher Education Mission

The founding purposes of the American Higher Education system were to create civic leaders and prepare clergy. In the late 1800s, over 200 years after the founding of the first institution of higher education in America, the civic portion of the mission remained in tact, but

slightly different with the establishment of land grant institutions which offered education for the common man and stressed the diffusion of knowledge for the betterment of all citizens (Herren & Edwards, 2002). Outside of the land-grant, other institutions during this same time began to reaffirm their dedication to society, led by the University of Wisconsin. What became known as the “Wisconsin Idea”, which was widely adopted by other universities, was the idea “to engage the institution’s resources and energies directly in the search for solutions to public problems” (Lucas, 1994, p. 175).

As a land grant university, Oklahoma State University is committed to the fundamental concept that education is to improve society. The OSU strategic plan (2004), states that OSU is working to achieve “national prominence as a leader positively impacting people’s lives across the state and nation.” The Leadership and Service program in the Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, & 4H Youth Development at OSU works to positively contribute to this strategic plan through the development and education of the program’s students. With the guiding principles being, 1) authentic leadership, 2) independent thinking, 3) professionalism, 4) a commitment to agricultural and natural resources, and 5) the opportunity for developing an open mind, the LAS program works to expose students to challenging learning opportunities and curriculum devoted to each of the guiding principles. One recently introduced learning opportunity, implemented to encourage independent thinking, the developing of an open mind, and a commitment to agricultural and natural resources is a field trip to Heifer International’s Global Village in Perryville, Arkansas. Although a fun-filled field trip, this is no trip to the local museum.

The Experience

The Heifer International experience is a carefully orchestrated and devised program exposing participants to true “tribal” life complete with unequal resources. The mere concept already is very different compared to what students are accustomed, in that the “unit of American society is the individual” (Mabey, 1995, p. 314). Students (and faculty alike, if they so choose) are at first oriented to the Heifer purpose, given a tour of the Global Village and then divided by lottery into “family” units. Units range from the “privileged” Guatemala home, which boasts a three-room, cement-floor house and garden, to the Refugee Tent Camp and Urban Slums where resources are scarce. Because resources are not divided equally, trading and bartering are a must for each village. Students work together to garner resources and to determine and prepare the evening meal. The meal-time experience is in stark contrast to the luxury of the student union food court where each individual has a wealth of options and conveniences related to mealtime.

Although only approximately thirty-six hours from departure to return, the Heifer experience packs a powerful punch. Prior to the trip, students demonstrated serious trepidations as to what is ahead of them. “Are there bathrooms?”, “How will we keep the animals away while we sleep?”, and “What do you mean I have to leave my cell phone in the van?” are just a few of the questions posed. The van ride there, however, offers an environment of camaraderie, as everyone realizes that we are all in for the same adventure. After the experience, the ride home offers a time of reflection, where conversation could turn toward comparisons of experiences and a one-upmanship of who had it the hardest. Time will tell.

It is the direct experience of injustice that opens our eyes and minds and too few of our students have had incidences of such direct experience. College is a time of learning and personal growth as noted by many researchers. In their book *How College Affects Students*,

Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini state that “college attendance does have a modest net effect on social conscience and humanitarian values above and beyond the characteristics and values students bring with them to college” (1991, p. 287). This effect can be heightened given the right experiences and the Heifer experience is one of such experience.

Sources:

Lucas, C. J. (1994). *American higher education: A history*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Mabey, C. (1995). The making of a citizen leader. In Wren, J. T. (Ed). *The leader's companion: Insights on Leadership through the ages*. New York: The Free Press.

Pascarella, E. T. & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.