Hydrophilanthropy, WaSH, and Experiential Learning in Developing Countries

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Abstract

I describe two different and unrelated programs, one undergraduate and one graduate, that: 1) introduced students to water research and WaSH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) issues in developing countries; 2) injected developing countries’ WaSH issues into a university graduate water resources program; and 3) introduced the concept of hydrophilanthropy – defined as the altruistic concern for the water, sanitation, and related needs of humankind, as manifested by donations of labor, money, or resources – to both sets of students.

From 2002 through 2004, a National Science Foundation-funded summer program, Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU), hosted by the University of Notre Dame (http://www.nd.edu/~reuwate) with the participation of the University of Nevada-Reno and the University of New Mexico, took undergraduates to developing countries (Haiti, Benin, Chile, and Honduras) to conduct water research. Participants were recruited from a national pool. Students received training in hydrologic techniques, international water and cultural issues at a workshop at Notre Dame, then departed for their international destination or one of the other two universities for additional work and then travel to the particular country each selected – generally, three students per country. After the international work, students and instructors completed the program at Notre Dame, where a debriefing was held and a program featuring
student presentations was convened. This paper emphasizes the Honduras component of the REU program, the one I conducted.

From 2001 through 2005, I conducted the required capstone summer field course for the University of New Mexico’s Master of Water Resources (MWR) degree in Honduras. Students participated in the construction of gravity-flow village drinking-water systems, working alongside villagers in small (c. 300-600 residents) rural mountain villages. To maximize the cross-cultural experience, students lived, worked, ate, and slept in the villages. During the five-year duration of this program 65 students participated. Some were motivated to conduct their professional project on various facets of rural water in Honduras and a few were motivated to pursue work in the general area of WaSH in developing countries after graduation. The program was terminated after 2005 because I departed as director of the Water Resources Program and also desired to rethink the program, especially with regard to sustainability and cultural issues. In retrospect, the experience was extremely worthwhile for both the instructors and students, and I am planning to resurrect the program as an elective course at Oregon State University. Each program introduced and emphasized hydrophilanthropy and the importance of using water and sanitation as a means to improve peoples’ lives and futures.