Global Cooperation Newsletter

ICSW
International Council on Social Welfare

The materials published in the ICSW Global Cooperation Newsletter reflect both the global and the regional dimensions of ICSW activities. In this issue we are publishing an article profiling a case study of a Canadian post-secondary field school that immerses students into life at an ashram in India, a home for orphaned and abandoned children. The impact of participation on students is examined, with a specific focus on strengthening their sense of social responsibility. The findings of this study are important for better understanding opportunities for studying abroad.

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Expanding learning opportunities and building social responsibility through field school participation

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Expanding learning opportunities and building social responsibility through field school participation
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The university years provide an exciting time for learning and growth. Many students are at an age where they are still developing their identities, and experiences during the post-secondary years help shape the type of people that students will become in the future. This includes the development of a student's sense of personal and social responsibility (PSR). PSR encompasses dimensions of academic integrity, contributions to the larger community, consideration of the perspectives of others, civic learning, active citizenship, and democratic engagement (Ryder & Mitchell, 2013). Supporting the development of PSR, which in turn is carried into a student's future life, is often considered a key aspect of post-secondary education (Ryder and Mitchell, 2013; Cheung, Wing Lo & Liu, 2014; McGloin and Georgeou, 2015).

Providing opportunities to give back to the community through volunteering is one way universities can play a role in supporting the development of PSR in students (Cheung, Wing Lo & Liu, 2014). Mount Royal University (MRU) in Calgary,

Alberta, Canada, has a number of experiential learning opportunities available for students, including local practicums, community development projects and international field schools. International field schools, in particular, are thought to contribute significantly to growth in students. Personal growth develops as students engage in an altruistic exploration of self. A sense of social responsibility grows when students understand the meaning of their experience abroad in the context of their own lives. They may then assess their own responsibility in terms of helping others in society.

MRU's India Field School
Since 2012, MRU has taken students biennially on a field school program to Northern India. Two faculty members — one from the Business and Communications Faculty and one from the Faculty of Health, Community & Education — structure the field school around two 3-credit courses, with a stay in India for 22-24 days as the centerpiece. The two courses are at the heart of the field school, with one encouraging mobilization and action and the other encouraging cultural sensitivity and self-reflection. There is a significant pre-departure phase of several months for planning and another post-India block week that rounds out the field school schedule.

While in India, the field school immerses students into life at the Sri Ram Ashram (SRA), a permanent home for orphaned

and abandoned children. The SRA provides its children a safe, loving and respectful environment from childhood to adulthood. The MRU students spend time at the ashram working on course projects, while also engaging with the community. Course projects include consideration of social development, health, education and child development, and are designed to enhance the students' project development, research, team building and critical thinking skills. Students are asked to collaborate with a small group of children, youth or staff to ensure that their projects meet the needs of both the ashram and the university. A key component of the project work is that the final product be returned to the ashram, thereby reinforcing the notion that the students are guests and do not 'own' the projects that are completed.

The ashram routinely encourages visitors, including large groups such as the MRU students. All guests are invited into daily life at the ashram, interacting with the children and learning from and with the ashram as the host partner. Fees collected from guests help to maintain the home, and guests contribute to the ashram by bringing elements of the world outside India to the children. The SRA and the students make lasting connections that typically extend beyond the conclusion of the field school.

Exploring Social Responsibility

Volunteer travel trips, such as the India Field School, are often at risk of being labelled voluntourism. Voluntourism is commonly defined as "seeking to affect positively the social, cultural, natural or economic situations of destinations visited, while gaining breadth and depth to one's personal perspective, in addition to travelling and enjoying 'traditional elements of travel' during personal leisure time" (Foller-Carroll and Charlebois, 2015, p. 139). Upon reading this definition, one can understand how difficult it may be to distinguish post-secondary field schools as

opportunities for the development of students' PSR from simply prosocial vacations (Liston-Heyes & Daley, 2017). Curious about MRU's role in encouraging the development of PSR through international field schools, we strived to explore whether the goals and outcomes of this work were genuine and if it was volunteering for development as opposed to voluntourism. In order to gain a greater understanding of these study abroad opportunities, a decision was made to explore the motivations underlying the students' decision to participate in the India Field School and to talk to them about their experience.

The students were surveyed using the Youth Social Responsibility Scale created by Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger & Alisat (2007), before and after their trip. Focus groups with 3 of the students were also conducted, pre- and post-trip, to gather comparative data. Before they left, students were asked about what motivated them to participate, how they understood their role, and what they thought the impact of the trip might be. Post-trip, students were asked about their experience in the field school and how the trip has impacted their sense of personal and social responsibility.

What Did We Learn?

The pre-trip survey reflected a very strong sense of social responsibility in the majority of field school students; similar results were seen in the post-trip survey. Arguably, this suggests that one of the reasons students participate in field schools is because they are socially minded to begin with, but it tells us nothing about the impact of their participation on their sense of social responsibility. The focus groups, however, tell a different story.

Prior to leaving for India, the students expressed strong expectations of personal growth. They spoke in depth about the changes they hoped to see in themselves,

brought about by their experiences on the trip. This was a big part of their motivation to take part in the field school. Their comments reflected anticipation of becoming better people in some way, but they never articulated how they might change. This aligns with the proposed outcomes of personal growth that are thought to be achieved through field school participation.

The beliefs about what would happen on the trip were revisited in the post-trip focus group. The participants discussed how these pre-trip expectations were unreasonable and had actually put a lot of pressure on them to experience the field school in a certain way. They all said that because other people (e.g., field school alumni, field school faculty) told them that they would change, they felt like they should change. This made it difficult for the students to come to terms with their own experience. They wondered whether it was okay not to like things in India or to accept things that went against their own personal values. They talked about going back and forth between respecting and rejecting the culture. Participant 2 explained, "when I saw other people loving it, it made me feel like I was doing it all wrong."

When asked, in the pre-trip focus group about what motivated them to participate in the field school, the students provided a variety of different reasons. The discussion did not reflect any sense of altruism, there was no concern for any social issue, and they did not identify any kind of collective purpose. Upon return, the students again discussed a range of different experiences, from loving the trip and wanting to return to feeling like the trip was not as good as they expected and finding India a very difficult place to be. It was clear that all three participants were going through a process of reflection and were trying to figure out what the experience meant to them. Talking to them at a time when they were working through this process made

us think that this was the time for growth. It was through reflection, afterwards, that the participants were developing PSR and realizing the impact of the trip. This suggests that PSR develops through a struggle for answers, one that requires deep thought and time.

In the pre-trip focus group, the participants were asked directly if they thought the field school could have any impact on systemic or structural issues in the country visited. They all stated that they hoped it would, but they were unsure how that might happen. Although they rejected the idea that they were going to help others, they did express a passion for social justice. This was also discussed post-trip, and the students reiterated the notion that they were not there to help or fix anything. They did, however, explain that the experience opened their eyes to what they could do. Where they didn't feel equipped to make changes at a systemic level in India, they did feel inspired to do something at home, in Canada. They felt it was easier to be an advocate for social justice at home and they all expressed an interest in doing something. For example, participant 3 explained, "you see all the things that makes your heart ache, you feel really helpless, like no amount of help is going to change this… but it does make you think about what you can do. What role can I play?" In the end, the students connected their experience in India to notions of social responsibility in the context of their own lives.

The focus groups provided tremendous insights into the impact of field school participation. Conducting these discussions, both before and after the trip, revealed a complex process that the students were going through, each one unique and dependent on a range of factors. Personal growth and the development of social responsibility were part of this process and each person had to find their own way through. Participant 1 so aptly reflected, "not everyone is

starting from the same place; they might not even be running the same race". As such, universities may need to think about the appropriateness of using the development of social responsibility as a goal or an outcome of field school participation. Perhaps, instead of looking to see if students come out of the experience as socially responsible or more socially responsible, we might look to see whether participants are able to grapple with what this means, for themselves, for others, abroad, and in the context of their own lives. Could the ability of students to think critically about this indicate success? These findings are helpful to better understand study abroad opportunities that are being offered at a post-secondary level. Field schools can contribute to the development of personal and social responsibility, but this may not be an end in itself. Managing expectations, supporting students in understanding their role, and allowing time for reflection on the experience is all part of this process, which can be facilitated by faculty and through course design. Allowing space for students to wrestle with their own experiences may be the most socially responsible thing we can do!

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