

Unexpected Learnings: Rescue from Peru

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Description: This session will tell the story of twenty-one students from Gustavus Adolphus College, along with myself and my co-leader, who recently spent January in Peru, where we had an unusual conclusion to our service learning experience. We had spent two weeks in Chimbote, teaching English to children and adults as well as working in a local medical clinic and hospice as a part of an interim course: *Education, Healthcare and Poverty in Peru - a Service Learning Experience*. Teaching and providing health care assistance were the key foci of the course, and the students worked hard in the midst of a very poor, dry and dusty location to provide the excitement of learning English to the people of the mission where they were staying. The students also supervised a day at the beach for about one hundred of their younger pupils. The Gustavus student's reward for this hard work was an overnight trip to the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu in the Andes Mountains. The only way to make this journey was by train, and we had tickets to return to Cusco after our tour. However, while visiting Machu Picchu, the intense rains of the previous few days produced even higher water levels and increased flooding, destroying the train tracks. Situated high in the Andes with no other access, the loss of train tracks between this village and Cusco meant there was no way out. We were stranded in Aguas Caliente.

Motivation for this session: This session will provide insight into how faculty and students react to stressful situations abroad and how one might handle such a case.

Despite our lofty goals to serve others, we suddenly found ourselves needing service from the people of Peru. With only overnight bags and limited personal items, we had to deal with finding housing, food and water in a community with over 1500 other travelers who were also stranded and seeking shelter. What expectations should faculty have for students in a situation such as this? Can we articulate expectations for a course that includes the ability to be flexible and manage life under unusual circumstances? What are the expectations for the college in such a situation? For the faculty themselves? How does one safely supervise a group of American students in a stressful, pressure-cooker situation such as this? Most importantly was the question – how do we get ourselves out when we are stuck in a foreign country? These questions will be addressed in this session.

Session outcomes: Through this narrative, it is hoped that faculty who conduct international service learning courses will be able to determine how they might react in a similar situation, and administrators can plan for management of such a scenario. Awareness of the emotional reactions and the political realities of the country in such a situation are important. Not everyone is equipped to facilitate learning when individuals are in a heightened state of stress and anxiety – yet this is the perfect time to reflect on the purpose of the course and the perceptions and biases that we all carry with us. In addition, it puts students to the test regarding their own abilities to cope with uncertainty and support each other. Description of this event will provide opportunity for participants to discuss possible ways to prepare students prior to travel in challenging environments and to plan for managing the situation if one such as this arises.

Impact: All of the students on this trip worked hard at their service when we were in Chimbote, but also demonstrated their ability to deal with stressful situations and remain upbeat and positive during the time we were stranded. These students have had a life-changing experience that will make them strong individuals wherever they work in the future. We had a lot of reflection time while we were in Aguas Calientes, and we all had to come to terms with the fact that we, as Americans, were not special in this situation.

Returning home, the students have settled into second semester classes, but we all have expressed a desire to provide some additional service to the Peruvians. Some are working to collect school and health care supplies to send to our former students in Chimbote. Others are working to collect funds to send to Aguas Calientes, as the village depended on tourism and were without train access to their popular vacation site for several months.

The value of this experience – of viewing life from the perspective of those in poverty who still support those in need, forced all of us to consider how we Americans respond to adversity. We also had to think about how we are viewed in this world and why others may not be fond of us, or our culture. As the students themselves expressed in their final reflections, “a situation like being trapped in Peru really makes you really appreciate what you have and makes it clear that we all have a role to play in the world to make things better. . .” “. . . you recognize that you have much to give and a responsibility to do so.” And that, after all, is what you would hope to have students gain from a service learning course.