GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, SERVICE-LEARNING, AND VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES ABROAD
ABOUT THE FORUM ON EDUCATION ABROAD

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MISSION STATEMENT

The Forum on Education Abroad serves as the collective voice of U.S. post-secondary education abroad. To benefit students, The Forum develops and disseminates comprehensive standards of good practice, resources and training, advocates for education abroad and its value, and engages the field in critical dialogue.
INTRODUCTION

Community engagement, service-learning, and volunteer experiences abroad offer students unique opportunities to learn through interaction and collaboration with communities, working alongside community members who approach challenges with a lens framed by their culture. The most effective community engagement, service-learning, and volunteer experiences abroad offer reciprocal benefits to communities and students.

Whether a stand-alone program or one component of a course or program, community engagement experiences abroad present a unique set of benefits and challenges for students and institutions/organizations. It is essential to ensure that the project(s) undertaken by visiting students are community-identified and driven. Community engagement, service-learning, or volunteer experiences can help address needs or challenges present in and innovations desired by the host community. Program developers and leaders bear an ethical responsibility to thoroughly research and investigate the service opportunity, organization, and/or issue to understand the implication of their activity.

It is critical that institutions and organizations developing community engagement opportunities empower the diverse voices and perspectives in a community, rely on local expertise, and involve community members from a range of perspectives continuously, from project idea through completion. Throughout the process of working with communities to build community engagement experiences, institutions and organizations should prioritize the value of listening, learning, and working together with the host community, and avoid a results-oriented approach focused solely on specific timelines or deliverables.

Community engagement programs present another challenge to students, faculty and staff: even those with previous travel and/or education abroad experiences can find it difficult to make sense of cultural, resource, and economic disparities in the on-site context. Community engagement experiences generally take place in areas that have fewer material resources than traditionally popular destinations for education abroad. Intentionally structured community engagement experiences abroad can moderate pre-conceived notions and stereotypes about a country and community, and guide students to develop their listening and observational skills, along with a capacity for cultural humility.
These Guidelines focus on community engagement, service-learning, and volunteer experiences abroad, but may be broadly applicable to other types of education abroad programming for considerations relating to host community perspectives and concerns. *The Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad* apply to all education abroad opportunities. Use them together to develop and assess community engagement experiences abroad. For service or volunteer programs with a health care connection, it is important to consult the *Guidelines for Undergraduate Health-Related Experiences Abroad* as well.
KEY TERMS

**community engagement or community engaged learning**: a course, internship, program or experience that enhances academic learning through reciprocal relationships with communities that offer opportunities to advance critical thinking, develop civic skills, and address public problems.

**service-learning**: a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes.

**volunteering**: largely self-directed, unpaid work- or service-based learning opportunity initiated by students motivated to respond to the needs of an organization or community, often without specific learning objectives or associated coursework.

**coordinating organization**: the institution or organization responsible for organizing and arranging the service/community engagement opportunities; this can be a college or university, a program provider organization, or an in-country NGO.

**experiential site**: setting where students’ community engaged learning opportunity takes place.

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1 Throughout this document, “community engagement experiences” is used as the umbrella term for all community engagement, service-learning, and volunteer experiences.

BEST PRACTICES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

Community engagement, service-learning, and volunteer programs abroad require cooperation, thoughtfulness, diligence, and communication between the home institution, the coordinating organization facilitating the program, the experiential site, and the broader host community. Such programs are often located in developing, immigrant, or marginalized communities; building and managing these programs requires sensitivity to the dynamics of student volunteers from cultures of privilege working in communities with fewer material resources. In practical terms, attention must be paid to the program’s use of resources and its impact on the local community, and to understanding and respecting local cultural and societal norms and values. The following best practices can help achieve these goals while offering a valuable learning experience to students:

a. Ensure the identified needs and assets of the community, as determined by a wide range of community members, are upheld and prioritized within the academic program aims and objectives.

b. Make local community members partners in the relationship and rely on local knowledge in all stages of developing, implementing, and evaluating the program/experience.

c. Investigate potential partner organizations and community engagement activities and their implications thoroughly before establishing a program; refuse to partner with organizations that permit un-credentialed medical care, orphanage volunteerism, or other activities that are harmful to individuals or communities. Direct engagement with children in residential facilities/orphanages is discouraged.

d. Engage with recognized and established community organizations on-site, including governmental and non-governmental agencies. Program development should empower, not avoid, ignore, displace, disregard or circumvent local organizations and professionals.

e. Ensure that initiatives and projects provide sustainable feasibility and outcomes that benefit the host community.

f. Minimize harmful effects, and evaluate potential harmful, unintended consequences by asking questions such as:
   - Will the program take away the livelihood of locals, or duplicate or undermine existing services or resources?
• Will the program result in the extra use of limited resources?
• Could the host community become dependent on the services and/or resources provided by volunteers?
• How will the work be sustained and advanced after the students depart?
• On the basis of what source of information are the above questions being answered? Are local members of the community involved?

g. Collaborate and clearly articulate responsibilities of all involved organizations, institutions, and individuals. Reciprocity of value is supported by local experts understanding how they contribute to student learning and students understanding how they will contribute to meaningful outcomes in the community.

h. Provide support for clear and efficient communication among the participants, the experiential site, and the coordinating organization, and between the home institution and the coordinating organization.

i. Ensure the safety of the students and those with whom the students interact.

j. Uphold the highest standards of ethics, integrity, and professionalism among staff, faculty, students, and partner organizations.

k. Work with local experts who have knowledge of host community resources, values, customs, language, and opportunities.

l. Provide fair compensation for all direct and indirect costs associated with the program and its projects, such as transportation, housing, food, clean water, translators and other staff, supplies, electricity, and other fuel.

m. Develop an appropriate mechanism for evaluating outcomes and local impact; regularly evaluate and assess all partners to ensure that goals and responsibilities are being met.

n. Ensure visual images and social media used in promotional materials and program information appropriately represent the community in which participants will be engaging fairly and with dignity, and accurately represent the student experience and the work they will do on-site.

o. Ensure that faculty, staff, or chaperones working with community engagement programs are properly trained in working with host communities and the social, economic, and cultural contexts of the project at hand and prepared to help students navigate and reflect on the cultural, economic, social, and physical differences they encounter.
p. Ensure that faculty, staff, students, and/or chaperones have passed appropriate background checks and are sufficiently skilled to do the work or service project.

q. Over the course of the experience and afterwards, guide and encourage students to reflect on how the experience is contributing to their academic and personal development and worldview.
THE GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, SERVICE-LEARNING, AND VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES ABROAD

Use the following guidelines, along with the *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad*, when developing community engagement, service-learning, or volunteer programs and/or vetting potential partners.

1. MISSION AND GOALS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

- Establish that the primary student learning goal for community engagement experiences is to provide students with opportunities to develop intercultural skills and an appreciation for global issues and get to know and learn from the local community by working alongside them in purposeful ways.

- Allow the host community to articulate goals for themselves about what they will contribute to students’ learning and what they expect to learn from students.

- Clearly articulate how the community engagement experience relates to, supports, and enhances the institution or education abroad organization’s mission and goals and the goals of organizations in the host community.
2. STUDENT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

- Identify student learning and development goals specific to the on-site experience, host country, and culture.

- If the community engagement experience is a part of a larger course or program, ensure that the service component of the experience fits into the learning objectives established for the course/program.

- Ensure that faculty, staff, and/or chaperones are effectively trained to navigate issues of team-building, power and privilege, cultural adjustment, cultural bias, and conflict resolution that can arise among student groups and with community members.
3. ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

- If the experience is credit-bearing, clearly communicate criteria for the awarding of credit and identify who will evaluate the student on these criteria, which may include:
  - Number of service/volunteer hours required
  - Method of verifying hours
  - Attendance in an in-person or online class or seminar, as required
  - Readings, assignments, reflective journals, or other academic components as required
  - Criteria, including deadlines, for evaluating assignments

- Match student capacity, including knowledge, skills, and competencies, with the capacity necessary for the experience so that community well-being is not compromised.

- When students are involved in research, assure that all projects are reviewed by the appropriate oversight body for every entity involved before any research activities begin.
4. STUDENT SELECTION, PREPARATION, AND ADVISING FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

- Clearly articulate the expected knowledge and competencies needed to be successful in the experiential setting, such as language and interpersonal skills, cultural knowledge, attitudes and reasons for participating, and applicable academics, and how these will be measured.

- Clearly articulate the physical and emotional demands of the volunteer experience to allow students to make an informed decision about their participation in the work on-site.

- Involve experiential sites/host organizations in the interview and student selection process as much as possible, so that both student and host have as much information as possible prior to the community engagement experience.

- Ensure participants meet language competency requirements or that language services are available at the experiential site.

- Confirm visa requirements, which may be different from traditional student visas.

- Provide students with the following information about the community and their work there:
  - Name and description of the experiential site and the nature of its work;
  - A description of the scope and nature of the specific work participants will be engaged in;
  - Respective roles of the student, the community engagement coordinator, the experiential site, and the home institution and/or sponsoring organization;
  - A description of the location and environment where the student will be staying during the experience, including climate, housing conditions, etc.;
  - Student’s primary contact (coordinator or supervisor) on-site (name, email, phone number);
  - Expected time commitment (schedule, hours per day, number of weeks);
  - Requirements and competencies that will impact the student’s success in the experience site (skills, academic background, language ability);
  - Expectations of professionalism and appropriate conduct unique to the host culture;
Essential eligibility requirements, including but not limited to: physical abilities, personal background checks, drug testing, confidentiality, privacy, and non-compete policies and agreements;

- Learning objectives for the experience;
- Requirements for the granting of academic credit (if applicable).

- Provide ongoing orientation and teaching of relevant and appropriate skills and theory to ensure the health and well-being of both students and those with whom they are interacting.

- Inform the student of expectations and cultural differences that may impact their experience, including:
  - dress code
  - punctuality
  - interactions with experiential site staff and community members
  - language specific to the community engagement project
  - gender roles
  - attitudes toward LGBTQ+
  - interactions with members of the opposite sex
  - attitudes or stereotypes of foreigners (by community members)
  - racial/ethnic differences
  - social, economic, and political contexts of the experience
  - appropriate use of technology/social media and sharing information about the experiential site and community members
  - how to talk about culture, values, and political systems in their country of origin

- Ensure a clear, direct line of communication between the student and the staff or faculty member to contact in case of an issue or emergency at the experiential site.

- Ensure all experiential sites receive relevant background information on students prior to arrival to facilitate faster and more effective integration of the student on-site and ensure that all partners have the same information.

- Offer and encourage opportunities for reflection throughout the experience and after returning.
5. STUDENT CODE OF CONDUCT AND DISCIPLINARY MEASURES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

- Ensure that students are made aware in writing of consequences for acting unprofessionally or inappropriately in the experiential setting.
- Make students aware of their obligation to act appropriately and not engage in activities beyond their education, training, knowledge, and skills level. For service or volunteer programs with a health care connection, it is important to consult the *Guidelines for Undergraduate Health-Related Experiences Abroad* as well.
- Establish disciplinary measures to address students who engage in activities outside their scope of education, training, knowledge, and skills, and clearly articulate those disciplinary measures to students during orientation.
6. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

- Ensure all experiential sites adhere to international, national, and local laws.
- Ensure that participants understand and comply with all applicable licensing and certification policies, visa policies, research ethics, and any other code or policy applicable to their experience.
- Establish policies on the creation and distribution of final products such as research results, reports, audio/visual products, including processes for sharing such projects with coordinating organizations and/or experiential sites when appropriate.
7. ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROGRAM RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

- Recognize the implicit power differential that exists in educational partnerships that involve partners with disparate levels of resources and influence, as well as the potential impact of the program and student presence on local and organizational resources, economics, and social/cultural/political power hierarchies; consider these factors when making program-related decisions.

- Ensure that programs have adequate financial, human, and facility resources to provide a learning environment and access to health services for students.

- Assure experiences that take into consideration the assets and needs of the community in coordination with the student’s learning goals.

- Strive to build long-term relationships between institutions, organizations, and communities in order to ensure sustainable mutual benefit for all parties involved.

- Compensate translators and other persons supporting participants fairly and in a mutually agreed upon fashion in advance of program start date.

- Maintain appropriate staffing levels to train, oversee, and ensure the safety of students while at an experiential site.

- Make participants aware of the limits of an experiential site’s resources and of being respectful of the resources they use. Check in regularly with experiential sites and students during the course of the program to ensure this is being done.
8. HEALTH, SAFETY, SECURITY, AND RISK MANAGEMENT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

- Articulate clear expectations for coordinating organizations and experiential sites regarding health, safety, and security of the participants; partnerships may be dissolved and participants removed from the site if articulated expectations are not met.

- Select coordinating organizations and experiential sites with comprehensive health, safety, security, and risk management policies to protect participants’ and community members’ health and well-being.

- Review relevant individual participant physical and mental health information, including medical conditions and physical fitness level that may be necessary to do the service work proposed, prior to the arrival on site, to identify any special considerations or accommodations that might need to be taken into account.

- Provide participants with information about any potential health or safety risks specific to the site that they might be exposed to during their program.

- Include in pre-departure and on-site orientation information about safety protocols when working at the experiential site and training on what to do in specific case scenarios.

- Include a policy to protect children and vulnerable populations with whom students, faculty, and chaperones may interact.

- Provide point of contact for both parties (student participant and experiential site) in case of health, safety, or risk management crisis.

- Ensure that participants are made aware that they are responsible for understanding their own limitations; educate and empower them to decline when asked to perform activities outside their scope of education, training, knowledge, and skills to protect themselves and the community.
9. ETHICS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

- Prioritize human dignity and community autonomy such that educational agendas of the student or the home institution are not prioritized over community safety, autonomy, and dignity.
- Recognize the risk of paternalism, exploitation, and neocolonial behavior on behalf of institutions/organizations from resource-rich environments when engaging with partners in low material resource settings.
- Research and investigate the community engagement opportunity, organization, and/or issue to understand the implication of potential service activities on local communities and individuals, particularly for service activities relating to health care settings, child care settings, and work with vulnerable populations.
- Respect the needs and assets of the community when developing learning opportunities for students.
- When the project involves work with vulnerable and/or low-resource communities, ensure that participants receive training appropriate for work with vulnerable populations.
- Honor the ethical obligation to ensure that all experiential site staff who have contact with the participants understand their level of education and qualifications (or lack thereof), as well as the appropriate nature, scope, and limitations of participants’ activities.
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\(^3\) See also, Campus Compact: Global SL. https://compact.org/resource-posts/ftl/.