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Studying Community and Development in The Gambia and Senegal: A Case Study of the Initial Offering of a Unique Course

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This case study describes the development and initial offering of a unique study abroad course centered on community-driven development in The Gambia and Senegal. The objectives for the course were to enhance students' understanding of the roles and impacts of civil society, social capital, and community-driven development, while fostering an ethic of global citizenship, as they studied theories of community development and nongovernmental organizations. Students were exposed to a range of experiences, including site visits to development projects, cultural events, visits with local families, lectures, reflective sessions, guest speakers and service projects. Key lessons learned from this initial offering of the course centered on the impact and importance of: local partners, a clear organizing theme (in this case community-driven development), interpersonal connections, service projects, and frequent opportunities for student reflection. We end with a set of recommendations for others planning to offer similar courses.

KEYWORDS: Civic Engagement; Study Abroad; Community Development; Reflections; Development.

Introduction

As discussions of civic engagement and civic education have evolved in recent years, some have pushed the conversation beyond a notion of active citizenship within one's country, toward calls for promoting values of global citizenship.¹ As if cultivating civic engagement were not hard enough, the idea of cultivating and promoting a sense of global citizenship (or a sense of connection to and responsibility for the well-being of others beyond one's own country) is an even larger mountain to climb. And yet, it is essential. A broader sense of global citizenship is more necessary as transnational interactions are normalized, the global economy and global interactions increasingly shape fates of communities, and the well-being of individuals around the world increasingly depend on developments, trends, and decisions made outside of their own country. Thus, in our role as educators, we are called upon to craft learning experiences to push students toward an ethic of global citizenship.

Of course, this task is complicated by the current nature of cross-national interactions—especially between those of the global North and the global South. The history of colonization, neo-colonialism, paternalism, racism, and ethnocentrism challenges the prospect of cultivating notions

of global citizenship characterized by transnational standards of justice and equity that recognize and respect the full humanity of all individuals and empathizes without romanticization or paternalism. Yet, this is the task that the authors of this chapter set out to accomplish. We attempted to craft a course that would enhance our students' understanding of the role of locally controlled civic organizations in developing their own communities while also enhancing our students' sense of global citizenship.²

This chapter is a description of how through effective course design, ideal partners, and good fortune—we developed and implemented a new study abroad course that facilitated student learning about theories of community and development and, at least in the short term, increased students' understanding of global interdependence, fostered greater empathy with others outside the US, and enhanced students' sense of responsibility for fellow global citizens and their sense of efficacy relating to improving conditions of under-developed communities.

Study Abroad as a Vehicle to Promote Civic Engagement and Global Citizenship

Many college students find study abroad inaccessible regardless of ethnicity or race. They tend to look at cost and self-segregate. Cost has been cited as the main obstacle to participation especially among minority and first-generation students.³ Universities and government institutions have been deliberate in their quest to diversify study abroad programs.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in, and support for, study abroad programs. Once on the margins of the university curriculum, these programs have gained a more central location. No longer is international study abroad relegated only to specific departments. There has been an awakening within various academic departments about the value in international education and a push to meaningfully engage students to provide a more holistic college experience. The Institute of International Education (IIE) indicated that during the 2017/18 academic year, study abroad participation increased by 11% to 341,751 students.⁴ This increase continued the next year as well.⁵ This includes a noticeable rise in students of color and from lower-resourced backgrounds.⁶ Increasing involvement in these programs has been supported by federal funding of programs such as the Gilman and Boren scholarships. This government support has strengthened and expanded various study abroad programs.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic halted study abroad during the 2020/21 academic year, so long-term impacts remain to be seen.

Empirical research shows that students who participate in study abroad programs report being positively transformed by it and often bring ideas, knowledge and resources back home.⁸ Yet, while these experiences are beneficial to students, little attention is given to how unique courses are developed and to the impact such experiences have on outcomes related to civic orientation, a sense of global citizenship, or cultural understandings that transcend the specifics of the setting for a particular class.

Extant research on study abroad programs tends to focus on learning outcomes and assessment.⁹ Program design, such as level of integration with local student population, housing situation, and level of interaction with host culture, is also a focus.¹⁰ We set out to develop a course to do what we believed was essential, despite the limited literature and the paucity of models using a similar approach focused on the array of outcomes we were seeking: to help students understand the roles and impacts of civil society, social capital, and community driven development and enhance their sense of global citizenship. For us, enhancing notions of global citizenship means developing students' understanding of other people (including an appreciation of their challenges as well as their capacities) and increasing their sense of responsibility for others beyond their own country.

Based on these learning objectives, a key element of the course-design was student engagement in “service” projects, and thus we had to be intentional about staying away from the “charity mode” typical of other short-term study abroad programs. Asghar and Rowe (2017) have described the exploitative nature of short-term programs that fail to provide appropriate appreciation of

power struggles and inequities entrenched in working with poor, disenfranchised, and marginalized communities.¹¹ We consciously sought to avoid cultivating the “white savior” mentality which Nordmeyer et al. (2016) describe as being less about justice, than about the students having an emotional experience that “validates privilege.”¹² We did not want our students to help those in the communities we visited just to feel good about themselves. Thus, we consciously designed experiences to help them to understand their privilege yet enable them to engage and interact with residents in ways to avoid this privilege being a defining or dominant dynamic of these interactions.

This chapter contributes to the broader literature on civic engagement and study abroad experiences by describing and analyzing a unique study abroad experience that straddled and connected multiple perspectives and voices from local communities, community organizations, international nongovernmental organizations, and academia. Important questions are raised and answered regarding our understanding of community development, civic engagement, and what it means to cultivate a sense of global citizenship. We believe our reflections and experiences will be useful to educators who seek to design study abroad courses and other community-based learning experiences that foster a sense of global responsibility, interdependence, and citizenship.

Developing the Course

Faculty leaders began to seriously consider the idea for a course on nongovernmental organizations, civic engagement and community at the international level in 2017. Conversations centered on the potential value of a course that examined theories of community development (including theories of development and theories of community) along with practical real-world examples of community-driven development in a setting outside of the United States.

By the spring of 2018, the authors decided to pursue such a course in The Gambia. We selected The Gambia because Dr. Sillah is from there and has intimate knowledge of the country. We later added Senegal given its proximity and the opportunity for exposure to a different political context and different civic initiatives. Dakar is one of the largest and most dynamic cities in Africa and offers a striking contrast to the rural communities and small urban areas of The Gambia. Furthermore, Senegal offers cultural and historical sites to enhance participants’ awareness of the context for their civic engagement activities. We proposed a course to Towson University’s study-abroad office to explore community development and local NGO’s efforts to address community needs in The Gambia and Senegal.

The authors relied on past experiences to craft a vision for the course. While we had not previously taught a study abroad course, we each had taught service learning/civic engagement courses in Baltimore City. In both of our cases, the courses highlighted community-led efforts envisioned by residents themselves. The projects in these courses invited students to engage community-led initiatives. These courses included lectures by the faculty leaders and guests along with readings and site visits where students learned about development projects while working closely with local residents and activists.

We wanted to take the same approach with the study abroad course. Thus, the new course would center site visits and conversations with leaders engaged in community driven development initiatives, and the students would participate in projects contributing to these organizations’ existing work.

By centering these experiences, we hoped to prevent students falling into “tourist mode.” We also sought to avoid the colonizer/colonized view - students giving their “service” and the community receiving the “service.” Importantly, the purpose of the course was not “charity,” “service,” or even “giving back.” The service or engagement projects would be designed for students to learn more about community-driven development with the intent to help students identify as contributors and collaborators in ongoing development efforts.

Given the differences between the previous civic engagement courses we taught and the planned study abroad course, we anticipated the need to deviate from our previous approach. Thus, we added cultural and historical site visits to further student understanding of the context of their

experience. We also limited readings given the limited time and the expectation that days would be filled with varied activities. We focused on a few targeted readings that exposed students to the cultures of The Gambia and Senegal. Readings focused mostly on The Gambia for several reasons. First, Gambia was our base and the foundation for the course. Second, most community partners were Gambian based. Finally, cultural immersion and student placement with host families and host institutions were done there. In Senegal, we met with community partners who were activists, and visited some cultural sites. The readings for Senegal were limited to history and geography of the country since the two countries shared the same dialects, culture, and customs. Our goal was to allow the students to forge interpersonal connections through experiential learning and decolonizing the concept of community development. This meant that theoretical content would primarily come from formal lectures and informal discussions.

A majority of the two weeks abroad would be spent in The Gambia (10 to 12 days) with the balance in Senegal (three to four days). The student experience would include formal lectures from faculty leaders, guest lectures from local activists, visits to local cultural and historical sites, site visits to community driven projects for a hands-on service project, and readings including a short novel by a Gambian author. Service projects were key to the experience to help students feel like contributors rather than mere observers or tourists. We included a range of service experiences, including a half-day spent in one community, student placements with local organizations, as well as other activities arranged by a local partner.

Given that vision, the most important task in developing the course was locating local partners that fit the model we used in Baltimore. Since what we envisioned was not a traditional study abroad course, we did not want to partner with a traditional study abroad organization. We needed partners who had expertise in the country, understood our approach to development, and would be able to offer the kinds of service/engagement projects consistent with our vision. That was a tall order. As fortune would have it, we found an ideal lead partner in Global Hands Inc., who—along with a number of other well-suited local organizations—agreed to work with us.

Global Hands is an international NGO based in England with direct connections to The Gambia. Its leader and co-founder Dr. Momodou Sallah of De Montfort University, is Gambian, and The Gambia is their primary focus. The organization addresses issues of “local and global inequality by raising consciousness about local and global issues through community engagement.”¹³ Global Hands help individuals and communities build capacity to transform lives. The organization’s mission was aligned with our vision. To say Global Hands was ideal is an understatement. In shaping the course, they pushed the experience beyond what we had initially envisioned. Thus, the outcome of the course was a product of the Towson faculty leaders’ collaboration with the leaders of Global Hands.

We initially sought to work with Global Hands to house our students in their facility—The Manduar Development Hub. As we learned more about them, we learned they had run what they called the “Gambian Development School” for both college students and others. They had extensive experience doing what we sought to do from a perspective that aligned with our vision of development. Thus, after settling on Global Hands as primary partner for lodging and logistics, the relationship expanded to include core content.

In finalizing the course, we adjusted plans to fit with Global Hands’ mission, vision, and expertise. Collectively we crafted the students’ experience. During the course, we regularly met with Global Hands staff to make adjustments and reach consensus on actions. In that regard, our approach was consistent with the insights and recommendations of Tinkler et al. (2014), that faculty should pay attention to community partner’s mission, vision, and resources throughout service-learning experiences. This is easier when the partner’s vision and mission align with the vision of the faculty leaders and course objectives.¹⁴

Global Hands’ relationships with organizations engaged in the work we sought to explore complemented Dr. Sallah’s knowledge of and connections to the area. Our combined efforts facilitated partnerships with local organizations that helped develop interesting experiences for our students. In particular, Global Hands pushed us to expand the scope of the immersive cultural

experiences we incorporated into the program plan. Those experiences proved to be invaluable additions to the course design.

The Course Design

Our final vision was rather ambitious. We designed a course for students to learn about theories of community development and nongovernmental organizations in the context of two predominantly Muslim African countries. It is important to note that our understanding of the term “community development” is rather broad. We agree with Ferguson and Dickens’ notion that conceives community development in broad terms, including a wide range of activities to enhance the “quality of life” for residents in a particular area.¹⁵ Given this concept of community development, we wanted students to take note of how local residents defined “development” and how they conceived their “development” priorities. Thus, the course is centered on direct exposure to community-driven development projects.

The primary objectives for the course are to enhance students’ understanding of the roles and impacts of civil society, social capital, and community-driven development while forming an ethic of global citizenship. By the end of the course, we hoped our students would demonstrate an understanding of, (1) The history of The Gambia and Senegal, (2) contemporary attributes of each country and, (3) community development as a strategy to address current issues and challenges (for details see table 1).

Each outcome was aligned with specific planned experiences. To understand whether students gain the knowledge, skills, and values connected to the course, we required them to make daily, reflective journal entries in response to specific prompts. These journals were collected at the end of the trip. Students were also required to write a final essay upon return to the US (See table 1)

Planned experiences ranged from site visits to development projects, cultural events, visits with local families, lectures, reflective sessions, guest speakers, and service projects. We purposefully went beyond contemporary development projects to present students with content related to the countries’ history (e.g., the transatlantic slave trade, colonization, neocolonialism and independence), as well as contemporary challenges facing each nation (e.g., the construction of democratic institutions and practices in the aftermath of authoritarian rule). We felt that understanding the historical and contemporary context was essential to understanding community development strategies and the visions guiding development work of the organizations studied.

We planned to spend most time in The Gambia travelling to both urban and rural areas. We would reside in Manduar, a village outside the urban center of Brikama. This was key to give students a sense of life in a rural community (limited access to infrastructure and key services) with vibrant civic organizations and a strong sense of community. We would also spend three days in Senegal staying in Dakar, one of the most dynamic cities in West Africa. We anticipated the contrast would be insightful.

Implementation: The Actual Experience

The course was initially offered during the minimester of January 2020. Students departed on January 2nd and returned on January 20th. Ultimately, 11 students took the course, including one freshman, two seniors and eight juniors. Of this eleven, six majored in political science or a related field. One student was from another campus and did not take the course for formal credit. Below we describe some key experiences—both highlights and lowlights—followed by a description of student outcomes and key lessons gained from the course development and the initial offering. We begin with a brief description of the two countries followed by a discussion of our experiences.

The Gambia and Senegal

The Gambia is small with a population of about 2.2 million. It achieved independence from

Table 1. Learning Outcomes

After completing this course, students will have an enhanced understanding of:	These outcomes will be achieved through the following activities:
<p>The history and culture of The Gambia and Senegal, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The history of the area prior to contact with Europeans • The role of this region in the Transatlantic slave trade, and the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on the region. • The process and European colonization and the impact of colonization on the people of the region • The process of decolonization and movements for independence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Hub activities • Lecture from Minister of Culture <p>Visits to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senegal Monument • Museums (Katchikally) • <i>Senegal museum</i> • Historical sites • Fort Bullen • Kunta Kente Island • Goree Island
<p>Contemporary attributes of each country including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural practices, • Recent economic, social, and political developments • Current issues and challenges facing each country • <i>Natural and Ecological attributes</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Visits • Market visit • Kerr Omar Farm visit • Hub exercise and discussion • Reading “The Magic Calabash” • Family visit • Community partner—activities • Logic of the System Conference • Guest lectures
<p>Community development as a strategy to address current issues and challenges, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The concept of community development • The range of actors who participate in community development and their impacts • Local visions of development • Key examples of community-driven initiatives seeking to address: education and youth development; gender equity and women’s rights; environmental justice and sustainability; economic development and poverty alleviation; health and wellness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lecture: Theory of Comm Dev • Lecture: status of women • Lecture: local issues, groups • Talk on Female Circumcision (FGM) • Visits to Starfish, Kafuto, Komforo • Community Placements • Community Projects • Hub Activities • School visits • Guest lectures
<p>The use of the arts as a vehicle for community development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senegal rap group • Senegal mural tours

Britain in 1965. From independence until 1994, it had a long record of democratic practice and tolerance. Under its first president, Sir Dawda Jawara, the country's status as a stable democracy and promoter of human rights led to the establishment of headquarters for the first permanent Secretariat of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights in The Gambia. Jawara was a renowned peace promoter and internationally acclaimed for his commitment to the rule of law and multiparty democracy.¹⁶ Jawara's successor, Yahya Jammeh, undermined the democratic process and turned toward authoritarianism—with a broad record of repression and human rights violations that included the silencing of political opposition.¹⁷ Jammeh's rule ended in 2016 when he lost the presidential election and was pressured by Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS's) military forces to accept the election outcome and leave office.¹⁸ Under Jammeh's successor, Adama Barrow, civil society organizations have re-emerged and re-opened democratic space. The government has strengthened civic participation through policies that engage young people and increase volunteerism.

Senegal borders The Gambia on three sides and is much larger, with 16 million people. The countries have a common cultural heritage and religious make-up despite the fact that The Gambia is English-speaking, and Senegal is French speaking. Senegal achieved independence from France in 1960. It too has a record of democratic governance. However, while its government is democratically elected and politically stable, authorities have been known to arrest members of opposition movements to suppress dissent. Yet, there is space for dissent, and opposition movements have had successes in recent years. It too has a vibrant civil society.¹⁹

We arrived in The Gambia on January 3 after 20 hours of travel. We were picked up by representatives of Global Hands who brought us to the Manduar Development Hub, where we would reside while in The Gambia. This location was important to give students a sense of security and see firsthand what development meant to people who lacked a direct voice in national policies. We were embedded within the community. While we had consistent access to running water (cold) and electricity, and even sporadic WiFi access, our neighbors' access to these essential services varied. Yet, the community had a visible drive toward their own notion of development. The origin of the Hub exhibited this drive. It was the product of a partnership between Global Hands and the village of Manduar and was the site for various development projects. Global Hands staff (some who lived in Manduar) explained that the *Alkalo* (the village head) played a key role in establishing the Hub. The village provided the land and community members worked at the site. There appeared to be a real sense of partnership. The facility is a valuable asset as a space where residents can access running water, electricity, and the internet. Through conversations with staff and neighbors, we came to understand we were not merely guests of Global Hands—we were in fact guests of the Manduar community. Much of what we learned about the village and the origins of the Hub came through informal conversations—highlighting the potential for civic learning that comes with being embedded within the community.

Throughout our time abroad, we engaged in a range of activities—planned and unplanned—that immersed and intimately engaged students (and faculty) into local culture and development efforts geared to building capacity among local communities. The course can be divided into five sets of activities: cultural immersion, historical sites, community development site visits and guest lectures, engagement activities, and the journey to and from Senegal. Most of the cultural and historical activities occurred during the first few days of the trip, while community development and engagement activities occurred in the latter days. The trip to Senegal occurred from day eight through day ten and stood out as the most challenging portion of the course, deserving of its own category.

Cultural Immersion

The first few days were dedicated to immersion into the local culture while familiarizing ourselves with the country's languages, religious practices, clothing, food, etc. The highlights of this phase were the visit to the *Alkalo* on our second night and the students' visit with local families on the

third day. When visiting the *Alkalo*, we brought kola nuts (a traditional offering and sign of respect used in traditional ceremonies like marriages and naming ceremonies) and other gifts. When we later learned the *Alkalo's* role in establishing the Hub, we all better understood the importance of paying our respects as guests of the village. The family visits had a special impact. Students spent the entire day with local families who had been pre-selected by Global Hands. Students later said these visits with individual families were among the most valuable experiences of the course. They observed gender roles, as well as the day-to-day challenges of maintaining a household when preparing meals required hours of work. Students participated in these activities but almost all reported they were not very efficient in their tasks.

During a reflective discussion the next day, students were excited to share their experiences, practically “bragging” about their host families. One student excitedly told others the mother in her host family was the leader of the guild of tailors in the village and another exclaimed that their host mother coordinated the guild that produced the soap used for washing clothes in the area.

The students were particularly struck by their conversations with residents. Two students, for example, described a conversation they had with a host (a young man) who had studied in Libya. His experience gave them perspective on the roots of African migration—the seeking of opportunities in other countries—as well as the difficulty obtaining an education.

It is important to note that while English is the official language in the Gambia, not everyone speaks English. Since families tended to live in compounds, usually someone who lives there speaks English because they have attended primary, high school, or even university. Most host mothers did not speak English yet communicated with our students because of the diversity found in the family compounds. While communication between the students and their host families was not easy, it was possible and ultimately impactful.

Immersion into the culture included other activities—some small, like drinking tea with villagers, and others more extensive—such as visiting the Brikama market and attending a community festival. Visiting the Brikama market was cited by several students as eye opening. Brikama, the closest city to Manduar, is one of the largest and fastest growing urban areas in The Gambia and contains an extensive market where locals sell every product one might need—from food to clothing to various consumer goods. The market was busy, bright, bustling, with a blend of traditional and western items. Students were tasked with exploring the market to look for visible impacts of globalization. Students later presented their observations of how products and services available at the market (imported consumer products, financial exchanges, local produced goods, etc.), revealed ways globalization impacted the Gambian economy, politics, technology, environment, and culture. The students articulated the interconnectedness of various facets of globalization and how an isolated community in a small West African country is part of, and impacted by, globalization in both negative and positive ways.

Two final experiences that offered insight into Gambian life and culture included a guest lecture from Nana Grey-Johnson, author of *The Magic Calabash*, a Gambian novel students had read, and a community festival hosted by the Hub. The novel and discussions with the author gave a glimpse into Gambian folklore as well as aspects of Gambian religious and political history. The festival included drummers, dancers, a DJ, and other performers, and was well attended by local residents—many of whom performed. The event was fun and gave another glimpse into the local culture and the nature of community. Perhaps most notable were interactions between students and the families they had stayed with earlier. They were excited to see one another and expressed a sense of connection and pride. The students were overjoyed when some of the host mothers drummed and danced during the festival.

Overall, the value of interpersonal connections and extended immersion in the community gave students a deeper understanding of the needs and nature of development in the community. They witnessed a vibrant cultural life. A number of students later noted how that perspective shaped their understanding of what development ought to look like.

Historical Sites

Notwithstanding our focus on community development, it was key to learn the region's history. This was achieved through visits to historical sites, museums, and a conference call with the Gambian Minister of Culture. Highlights were visits to Kunta Kente Island (formerly James Island) and Fort Bullen in The Gambia, and Goree Island and the African Renaissance Monument in Senegal.

Kunta Kinte Island contained ruins of a fort that held enslaved captives awaiting transport to the Americas. It was renamed for Kunta Kinteh—author Alex Haley's ancestor described in *Roots*—who had been captive there. Fort Bullen was built as a British outpost to suppress the slave trade on the River Gambia—after the British banned the trade.²⁰ Visits to slave forts in both countries were emotionally moving as testaments to the horrors of the Transatlantic Slave trade and they symbolized the region's role in a global economy since at least the 1700s. Such global linkages were also manifested in the African Renaissance Monument which is said to point back to a still standing slave fort on Goree Island, and toward the Statue of Liberty across the Atlantic. This monument houses exhibits articulating the Pan-African movement and the African Diaspora.²¹

Community Development: Lectures, Site Visits and Engagement Projects

At the outset of the experience, we presented students with a general definition of community development to help frame our experiences. Our definition borrowed heavily from Ferguson and Dickens describing community development as a process that “produces assets that enhance the quality of life of residents” in a targeted community.²² We emphasized this process may produce enhanced assets such as physical capital, social capital, intellectual or human capital, financial capital and political capital among residents (or within the community) or increase access to basic services and needs (e.g., food security, access to water, electricity, healthcare and transportation).

We wanted students to understand that this broad definition allowed a wide variety of initiatives to come within our purview. We also hoped students would observe how local residents defined community development for themselves and what kinds of initiatives they felt should be prioritized. Lastly, we wanted the students to develop their own sense of what development means, and whose vision of development ought to guide efforts for particular communities.

The core experiences of the course centered on guest lectures, site visits with organizations engaged in development activities, and service projects at the Hub and with other partners. Among all these experiences, three are particularly noteworthy: the visit with Starfish International, our visit to the Kafuta community, and the Logic of the System conference held at The Hub.

Starfish International is a youth development NGO focused on the education and development of girls. Our entire group visited the site, and a smaller group spent an additional day of service. Starfish stood out due to their comprehensive vision and the impact it had on youth. Students were struck by the mission and the work—given challenges related to girls' education and gender roles. Students cited the independence of the organization as well as the indigenous nature of the group—it was founded by a woman from the community who returned home after studying in the US. It was one of many examples of community-driven initiatives not dependent on an international development agenda. Rather, Starfish crafted its own agenda and garnered its own resources to support itself. This organization combined programing around the arts, entrepreneurship, academic training, and workshops on independent living. We were all impressed by the dynamic of the girls in the program and the young women who staffed it. As a community-led and community-driven initiative, Starfish embodied the core focus of the course: programs designed by the community, for the community, to promote sustainable economic and cultural growth.

The visit to the Kufuta community provided our first opportunity to do hands-on “service.” We went there only knowing our role was to help community members clean out and paint a building. As we worked, we learned more about the project. The Kufuta Community Development Association (KCDA) sponsors a number of initiatives in the Kufuta community. The building we worked

on was to house a community library. The previous site had been damaged by termites. We learned about the important role the local library played and about other initiatives of the organization such as micro-enterprise programs and computer coding classes for girls. This project was locally led and largely financed by Gambian supporters. Students worked alongside community members contributing their effort and time to the project. Next, the leader of the KCDA took us to meet his mentor in the neighboring community of Komforro. We met the gentleman in a deceptively humble building on the side of the road. He spoke to the vast range of development projects he was working on. These included environmental projects to protect wildlife and technological projects to prevent deforestation. He also described micro-enterprise programs, such as one to train local residents in bee-keeping both as an economic project (for their finances) and as an environmental project to preserve the local bee population. We were surprised to learn they had planted some 5,000 trees in the area and were currently battling Chinese logging companies nearby. The extent and range of activities in Kufuta and Komforro demonstrated both local capacity as well as the local vision of development.

A third experience was less exciting, but impactful. Global Hands organized a conference that coincided with our visit. The theme of the conference was “Constructing Counter Narratives,” and featured scholars and activists from The Gambia and elsewhere. The recurring theme of the presentations was the need for Gambians to chart their own path of development and what that might look like. There was a constant critique of development agendas being thrust upon communities, and a desire for greater appreciation of local people’s capacity to know what they want and to define for themselves what development means and should look like in their community. This had a strong effect on the students. More than half noted in their final essays how their experiences presented them with “counter narratives.”

Building capacity for self-sufficiency was a recurring theme. We saw this in Kufuta, Komforro, Starfish International, as well as in the Hub. We heard this discussed at the conference. It was key for our students to appreciate the centrality of this sentiment. One final story illustrates this notion of building capacity for self-sufficiency. As our time to depart The Gambia approached, we decided to make a contribution to the Hub. We discussed working on their library—building shelves, fixing furniture, sorting and shelving books, etc. When we approached the Global Hands staff, they suggested we speak with some local residents. We learned that they liked the idea of fixing up the library, but really wanted a chicken coop. They explained a chicken coop would be a source of food and income for village residents. While we lacked the capacity to build a chicken coop – we did help get the project started. We bought tools and worked alongside residents to clear the field where they would build a coop. As educators, of course we love libraries, but it was important to model the theme of the course, which was letting communities chart their own course for development.

Senegal

The journey to and from Dakar was easily the lowlight of the course. We chartered a bus to drive from Manduar to Dakar. The journey entailed crossing the River Gambia by ferry, a border crossing, and driving through Senegal to Dakar. A trip estimated to take six hours took more than 12—each way! Delays were caused by crossings at the ferry and border, but the main obstacles were the frustratingly frequent stops by Senegalese police. We were stopped no less than twenty times on the way to Dakar. We later learned this was common for commercial vehicles with Gambian license plates such as ours.

While in Dakar, frequent police stops and ubiquitous traffic congestion made for a difficult experience. Though miserable, there were valuable lessons. The congestion spoke to the city’s rapid growth. Physical development was evident in new construction projects, a light rail system, and other signs of growth in a vibrant city. In addition to cultural sites mentioned above, the highlight of our time in Dakar was a visit with local activists. Ya No Marre is a movement led by one of Africa’s premiere rap groups and a group of young journalists that challenges the nation’s political leadership amid demands for reform. They offered the clearest example we witnessed of the

intersection between arts and civic activism. The students were struck by their commitment and approach to activism—using music to promote social change—despite contending with repressive responses from political leaders. Both activists we met with had been imprisoned for their activity.

Even though accommodations in Dakar were more familiar—hot water, mirrors, WiFi, restaurants, etc.—the difficulties in Senegal made our return to Manduar feel like coming “home.” Students were happy to be back to our modest lifestyle. Cold showers, no mirrors and limited WiFi etc., were barely noticeable inconveniences. As one student noted in her final essay, she considered Manduar “more like home” than Dakar, which “looked more like home.” This revealed an appreciation for living in the community that may not have been apparent without the contrast to our experience in Dakar. Of course, the nature of the trip was different. We were there a shorter time and were not embedded within a community. We experienced the country and city as outsiders. That may have ultimately been the biggest difference. Navigating the city was difficult—we were more like tourists—which contrasted with the interpersonal experiences we had in The Gambia.

Student Outcomes

The array of experiences apparently led to many desired outcomes—at least in the short term. We have already listed an extensive menu of intended learning outcomes, here we will discuss outcomes related to community development and global citizenship as revealed in the students’ final essays and their responses to a post experience survey. We also describe outcomes we observed from our vantage point.

Students were required to submit a final reflective essay upon return to the US. The prompt for the essay required students to describe insights gained from three key experiences and to discuss the overall experience of the course, including what if any impact it had on their understanding of development and plans for the future. We examined student essays looking for evidence of the following outcomes:

1. Enhanced understanding of global citizenship—the impact of global dynamics on the local experiences of residents.
2. Enhanced understanding, recognition, and appreciation of local visions of development and/or a recognition and appreciation of local culture and community dynamics.
3. Plans to expand engagement around global issues.

Of the 10 students who completed the assignment, nine demonstrated an understanding of the global impact on local communities, all demonstrated a recognition and appreciation of local visions of development and/or local culture and community dynamics, and nine expressed an intention to expand their engagement activities around global issues.

We were struck by the extent to which all students expressed an appreciation of the importance of local communities crafting their own visions of development—and the legitimacy of these visions. The following quotes from three student essays reflect this perspective:

“One major takeaway that will always remain in the forefront of my mind is to always assess the wants and needs of the people. It does not matter what an outsider of a community may think the people need, it only matters what the people of that community express that they need.”

“Development is the actualization of whatever community vision emerges, completely divorced from outside agenda or restrictive institutions.”

“They are able to assert their own agendas and impact change in the way they deem most important without having to listen to an outside source.”

Overall, the students’ essays revealed that they now see the world differently. Upon their return, students saw the world from a different perspective and recognized the limits of their previous perspectives. The following quotes are indicative:

“There came a point where I became emotional because I was never taught about the world in a Non-American context.”

“With these experiences I was able to slowly build a more accurate vision about Africa instead of the one portrayed in the media.”

Responses to the post-experience survey also suggest that students were positively impacted by the experience. When asked if they could “provide an example of how your education or applied experiences have helped you see communities that might otherwise remain unseen,” seven students gave examples. Two responses are typical:

“The harsh reality is that many of our most in need communities—domestically and internationally—are hidden and unseen by most everyone. Engaging with and living alongside such communities allows for a greater understanding of how to better acknowledge these groups.”

It made me realize that when we talk about Third World countries, we ignore the people living there. We put too much focus on organizations, governments, institutions.

Survey responses also indicated students believe the experience will impact their future engagement. They claimed to feel an increased sense of efficacy. When asked if the study abroad experiences influenced their “personal sense of [their] ability to make a difference, locally or globally,” eight students said yes. As their responses reflect, this seems due to their belief they participated in or observed activities that made a difference.

“Yes, the hub showed a way to have a community center that created tangible change and programming.”

“I feel much more motivated to impact my local community and to improve the lives of others. I viewed institutional barriers or government negligence as insurmountable previously, but the trip really transformed how I quantify and identify tangible change.”

“I now feel more empowered to make a difference on each level because I was able to participate in events that made a difference.”

But there was some nuance, as indicated by one student’s claim, “Yes, I feel more power in a local sense, less power on a global sense.”

Lastly, eight students said they will “engage in advocacy” more than they did before the experience. Interestingly, some noted how they planned to target their advocacy—with some saying they would focus on local issues (e.g., education in Baltimore) and others claiming they will focus on global issues.

We recognize that these responses were made in the days after their experience, and it is likely not all will actually expand their engagement in civic and global issues. However, the significance

in these responses is that the experience disrupted their normal thinking and, for a little while at least, helped them see the world and their role in it differently. It remains to be seen if this impact will be sustained over time.

Faculty Observations

Beyond what was evident in the students' papers and survey responses, we observed some important outcomes worth noting. In particular, the reflective sessions and informal conversations allowed us to see how they were processing their experiences. In this regard, four observations were especially significant.

Their identification and empathy with community members: We noticed that students exhibited a level of empathy with residents. For the most part, this was not overly paternalistic (although there was a bit of that). Their empathy primarily took the form of appreciation for the lived experiences and the challenges facing people they grew to care about and respect. They also expressed respect for local knowledge and local visions as reflected in their writings above.

Recognition of the impact and challenges posed by globalization: We began to see this from the first visit to Brikama Market, but it was a theme throughout the course. There was an underlying consciousness of the impact global dynamics had on local conditions we saw in The Gambia. Perhaps the most telling observation came during a reflective session following one of the student service days. The student working with the Brikama Development Corporation described their project producing innovative wood burning stoves that allowed locals to cook with less wood than typical stoves. The organization considered this a community-based solution to the challenge of deforestation by giving residents a tool to limit their consumption of wood. The student was impressed with this local solution to a key ecological challenge. The student's enthusiasm was dampened, however, after we visited the Komforro Organization and learned of their ongoing battles to prevent deforestation. A specific focus of their efforts was to curb the activities of Chinese lumber companies. Our student recognized the limited impact of more efficient stoves if the real culprits of deforestation were global economic actors. For our purposes, it was significant that the student told this story during a reflective session—thus all the students were able to process that understanding.

Recognition of gender roles: Much informal discussion and some formal reflections centered on gender roles. The students were at times frustrated with limitations on women and girls and were especially upset by the cultural practice of female circumcision. This was a factor in the level of impact of the FGM discussion and the visit with Starfish. That visit was emotional as students were inspired by the girls they met, so much so that two were planning to return to the Gambia to serve as interns for Starfish. Overall, they were moved that local efforts were addressing these concerns, not outsiders coming in to condemn local customs.

Religion: This was more an absence of concern. This was the first time any of them had spent time in a predominantly Muslim country, yet there was no discernable discomfort. We were all conscious we were in a Muslim country, by the mosques, signs celebrating religious leaders, the attire of some women and girls, the prayer calls, and occasional observations of residents pausing to pray. We did not detect much discomfort among students—nor did they comment on it much. With all the students had to say, their lack of comments on religion was noticeable. We took this as a positive indication of students moving beyond religion as an obstacle or impediment to connecting with the people or empathizing with their life experiences.

Lessons Learned

As we reflected on this experience—from course development through the initial offering—we identified some key lessons. The first lesson relates to the *importance of partners*. As mentioned above, Global Hands provided significant input to the final design of the course. It was key that their experiences and vision aligned with our own. Other local partners, like Starfish and Kufuta, also shared our understanding of development and our perspective on the contributions our

students could make. On the other hand, we would have benefitted significantly from an on-the-ground partner in Dakar. A local partner could have helped navigate that experience, travelled with us, and provided context, making our time spent in traffic more productive—and less painful.

Overall, our interaction with the partners was consistent with previous research and recommendations around faculty managing of community partnerships.²³ Faculty leaders were engaged throughout and consciously “managed” the student interactions with Global Hands and the other partner organizations. We maintained constant communication with the partners (e.g. regular meetings with Global Hands leadership) and sought to manage both the student and partner expectations. Managing the relationship at times meant trusting the judgment of the partners (as with the home visits which ended up being invaluable) or deferring to the partners’ desires (as with the decision to work on a chicken coop, rather than a library). But, again, this was possible because our vision was well aligned with the partners.

A second key lesson is the value of establishing a clear theme to provide a lens through which we would process our experiences. The guiding theme—community-driven development efforts—helped us to view our experiences through the lens of a community focus. This lens also served the objective to enhance notions of global citizenship as it highlighted local agency and local visions, rather than viewing residents as people needing to be saved. That frame helped us avoid the savior dynamic as well as tendencies to otherize people from different circumstances. We believe highlighting the expertise and vision of our partners shaped students’ responses to them. We suspect the effectiveness of this approach may lie in how we (the instructors) prepare and contextualize the experiences. Given that we view the organization’s objectives and approaches as legitimate and even innovative, this may have shaped the students’ response to these organizations both in the US and during our time abroad.

A third lesson is to reiterate the *potential impact of service/engagement projects* for a course on community development. In total, each student engaged in approximately 12 to 18 hours of service (four hours in Kufuta, four to six hours in placements with local organizations, three to five hours on a community action day for youth in Manduar, and two to three hours clearing land for the chicken coop). It is clear that students’ mindsets change when they are “contributors” versus “recipients” of information. Whether they were working on the library in Kufuta or at the Hub, students were no longer passively absorbing information. They were investing their energy, committed to the ultimate success of the project. This shift in student mindsets seemed to affect their perspective, even on projects they did not contribute to.

The fourth key lesson is that interpersonal *connections were critical*. Cultural immersion was critical to understanding the community and the development strategies it pursued. While we underappreciated that in our initial vision for the course, we came to understand that such experiences are essential to course objectives. These experiences, however, have to be planned carefully. Home visits, for example, were organized by Global Hands which had found those experiences to be valuable in the past. The value of these interactions was probably maximized by the fact that Global Hands had worked with the families before, and they understood the dynamic of working with foreign visitors.

A final lesson was that the *importance of reflective sessions* cannot be overstated. The formal and informal reflective sessions were used to explore theoretical concepts and to provide broader context. We consciously led these sessions to resist dwelling on feelings (or worse—gripes) and endeavored to direct conversations fruitfully. Thus, we found they served as effective vehicles for theoretical discourse propelled by students’ observations. They also presented opportunities to draw connections to student experiences in the US. In all, our experience affirms earlier findings that critical reflection helps one comprehend complex social issues and that more extensive reflection leads to preferable student outcomes in service-learning courses.²⁴

Given these lessons, we offer some recommendations to faculty who wish to develop a course with similar objectives. As they develop courses, they should:

- Have a clear organizing theme for the experiences and a clear perspective or

lens through which experiences can be processed.

- In designing the course, prioritize the types of “outside the classroom” experiences that bring about the desired outcomes.
- Prioritize selecting the right partners. While others are unlikely to find a partner like we did—with a facility embedded in the community and deep relationships and compatible experiences—the key is partners with comparable understandings of key objectives of the course.
- If possible, include service/engagement opportunities. This was key to avoiding a tourist orientation and promoted an orientation of contribution and collaboration. While service can be problematic, appropriately designed experiences model civic engagement, respect for others, and a willingness to contribute to the public good, as defined by the local community that collaborative work is designed to benefit.
- Prioritize inter-personal connections: This has implications for where you stay and the types of experiences planned.
- Prioritize formal and informal reflective sessions. Most of our theoretical insights came in the reflective sessions. These need to be led by faculty in order to keep the focus on the theoretical insights rather than gripe fests or what students like or don’t like. There may be a place for sharing frustrations, but for courses such as ours, the reflection was more about the process to mine ways that uncover and inspire theoretical insights.
- Lastly, learn from previous experiences. Students are the same, although the context is different. Thus, lessons and understandings from typical courses and engagement experiences are relevant.

These recommendations may not apply to all such efforts, but we suspect they may help in many cases. Our experience with this course has laid a foundation for future study abroad courses focused on community development and will help in traditional on-campus courses. Overall, we crafted an effective course design that led to an unforgettable experience. By prioritizing inter-personal connections, active onsite learning, and structured reflection, we deepened students’ understanding of themselves, of the importance of local agency and autonomy in fostering community and economic development, and of their role as global citizens in an interconnected world.

Endnotes

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17. Ibid.
18. Christof Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in the Gambia," *Africa Spectrum* 52, no. 1 (2017): 85–99.
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