



LEARNING SERVICE

DRAGONS' PHILOSOPHY ON SERVICE WORK ABROAD

HOW DOES DRAGONS ENCOURAGE A STUDENT'S DESIRE TO DO GOOD IN THE WORLD,

while at the same time ensuring that these experiences actually benefit local communities abroad?

Dragons believes that we need to shift the way we think of volunteer travel. Instead of focusing on “service learning”—on the idea that short-term volunteers can contribute to communities abroad—we advocate a paradigm shift; we choose, instead, to focus on “learning service.”

LEARNING SERVICE IS A HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE that combines an intimate and authentic engagement with the local community, the study of effective Development, and the contribution to an established community-driven project. It is the process of living, working alongside and absorbing the culture of those being served while coordinating closely with project managers to understand the trajectory of the project, from inception to completion and transference. It is an acknowledgment that not all service benefits the common good. And it is a commitment to making contributions that create an undeniable positive impact on the communities being served.

We believe that **effective, collaborative service work** begins when students are guided to ask the right questions:

- Was the project initiated by the local community, and is there community ownership and buy-in?
- Does the project value capacity-building over infrastructure development?
- Was the community service project decided because of actual needs in the community or because of the ease of integrating unskilled workers into the tasks?
- What is the life-span of the project, and how will the project build on itself once outside actors are no longer involved?

A GROWING BODY OF EVIDENCE WARNS THAT TRAVELERS SEEKING TO DO GOOD CAN END UP INADVERTENTLY HARMING THE COMMUNITIES THEY HOPE TO SUPPORT. In Cambodia, for instance, the growth of well-intentioned visits to orphanages may be perversely encouraging people to buy, rent, or kidnap children in order to maintain appearances for foreign travelers. According to a recent UNICEF report, 75% of children in Cambodian orphanages have at least one living parent.

THE MORAL RISKS OF HURRIED AND UN-VETTED SERVICE LEARNING EXTEND TO OTHER PROJECTS AS WELL. In Thailand, nearly 90% of foreign volunteers seeking to teach English are sent—week after week—to the same schools. As a result, each week, the same Thai students end up subjected to the same introductory English lesson (think “Heads, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes”) taught by well-intentioned and inexperienced Westerners. These schools end up becoming tourist destinations rather than places of learning. Effective community engagement often means investing in teacher training rather than bricks and paint. After all, how many children in Thailand really need empty buildings or one more Westerner to teach them “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes”?

DRAGONS' STUDENTS GAIN A SENSE OF WHAT REAL SERVICE AND GIVING BACK ABROAD SHOULD LOOK LIKE.

For one, Learning Service demands that we say “no” to an opportunity that may adversely impact the people and places we visit. It also requires that we sustain long-term relationships with communities abroad; while it is easier on schedules and budgets to plan short trips, we must not create a revolving door of unskilled helpers that locals must accommodate.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IS ALSO PARAMOUNT TO THE PROCESS OF EFFECTIVE SERVICE AND DEVELOPMENT WORK.

At Dragons, we work closely with organizations and individuals that represent and work to support the collective voice of the communities within which the project is being undertaken. Students are then brought into on-going relationships as honored guests and humble servants, adhering to the needs and goals expressed by those already in action, and adding their own contribution to an ongoing process. Projects that assume the needs of local people and operate with cultural chauvinism to implement a prepackaged service project often lead to inefficiency, miscommunication and an overall disempowerment amongst individuals. Accordingly, the organizations with whom Dragons works to provide service opportunities are often grass-roots organizations that were started within the community and are supported, run and often funded from within.

AS A CORNERSTONE TO GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION, Learning Service becomes a process of developing empathy for those whose resource-base and opportunity-levels may be less, but whose life-histories and cultures provide often profound lessons that aren't available to those living in more developed countries. By emphasizing the “learning” in Learning Service, students are encouraged to critically engage with their values while they develop a knowledge-base that extends beyond their short-lived engagement. In Learning Service, students achieve a larger understanding of development issues and the efforts to address systemic problems in health care, education, access to clean food and water, etc.. More significantly, students develop a moral compass in which they see how their actions and decisions impact the people and environment outside of their immediate communities.