Engaging Students in International Development Efforts

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Introduction  CARE-UGA, a new student organization at the University of Georgia, was started in 2005 by a group of students and faculty members, with the goal to encourage, challenge, prepare, educate, and provide opportunities for students to participate in international and service-learning activities dealing with reduction of extreme poverty, and enhancement of international development and cooperation. Students participating in the project were looking for a “social” platform to get involved in education, advocacy, and action in international development. Faculty was interested in increasing the level and quality of university-wide student participation in international and service-learning activities.

Method  The information shared in the carousel roundtable discussion will be based in participation statistics, program participant evaluations, focus groups, interviews, and participant observation.

Major Points and Information to be Shared  We will:
- Explain how and why the student organization was created, and who were the different actors in the process;
- Present a summary of our 2005 highlights and activities;
- Analyze lessons learned during our first year of existence, from faculty and student’s perspectives;
- Discuss how different experiences have changed our activities and plans for the future;
- Ask the participants in the carousel discussion to critique our program, make suggestions for improvements, and debate how the program could be adapted to their own campus.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned  By choosing an interdisciplinary and collaborative stepwise process, the CARE-UGA program was able to engage students with a broad range of needs (cognitive and affective) and interests, backgrounds and experiences, developmental stages, comfort zones, learning styles, and availability. The stepwise process allowed for students to choose the time, speed, and level of education and involvement they wanted to have in international development efforts and “explore” with minimal initial risk. While the flexibility and breadth of the project was very positive from the points of view exposed above, they also created tension and frustration among some students and faculty, who sometimes thought they were working too much to the advantage of others, or who felt pulled in too many different directions and unable to contribute within their expertise.

Educational Importance  The CARE-UGA student organization is a great contribution to the internationalization efforts at the University of Georgia, adding a multifaceted effort to the process. The program allows students from any discipline to work collaboratively with others in international development endeavors while choosing the level and intensity of their involvement. Sharing our experience and lessons learned during our first year with other students, faculty, and universities, will help them jump-start their efforts, and will also help us better plan and prepare for the future.