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International Volunteering: How to Navigate this Difficult Process

We were all sitting in class thinking about a single idea. How can we have the maximum impact through volunteering globally including ​​how to use our skills, strengths and advantages to serve the outside world? In our manifesto, as a class we declare that we will "provide an applicable situation for the Skills We Have and are working [with] to Improve upon while preparing us for the realities of a job abroad / with an NGOs. Then as privileged students with so much knowledge, what are the things we can offer international organizations? Thus began our search for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Spanish class 102C, an experimental course in the University of California, Berkeley.

First, we decided which countries that interest us specifically and we split into groups specializing in different countries including Chile, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Costa Rica. Later, through our research we discovered that unfortunately it is quite difficult to find NGOs that have clear purpose of serving people or assisting communities in the world. We often found that the groups operate as businesses that serve more as tourist agencies asking volunteers want to pay ridiculous amounts of money, and that they do not really help establish a project in their respective countries. In order to really know, one must read the reviews and comments left by other volunteers who have worked there. If you would like to find organizations with good intentions I taking a look at http://www.gooverseas.com/

In our groups we learned a great deal about the process of contacting NGOs. We learned that it is necessary to present yourself as a humble, sincere, and professional group. At that time we wrote letters to various organizations such as the Uniendo Caminos foundation in Argentina, Tech n Puerto Rico, and Misión Mexico and requested to have appointments to talk with them. Taking into account the restrictions that come with people abroad, we were forced to be very flexible. So the letters exchanged between us reflect and discuss how we could improve before sending our own representation before sending them. Then we had to be very adaptable in talks with organizations that occasionally we had to change the schedule for that day to talk with them in the morning only minutes after having received a response to their representatives. But above all, we learned not to give up in our communication with them and in a few weeks were able to establish a connection and interview most of them. In particular, one of my favorites was the enVia Foundation.

The enVia foundation is an NGO based in Oaxaca, Mexico, which helps women in their community to transform their lives towards the development of various skills in business. Women attend training classes to learn how to manage their money, their customers, their materials and businesswomen learn how to be more financially responsible. After going through various training courses, then they are granted loans in the form of interest-free microfinance. To me, it sounded strange that a village could use microfinance to assist and strengthen a community rather than control or abuse it as has happened many times in places like Africa and Latin America in other cases. In my experience, I have seen that microfinance serves to further impoverish communities rather than alleviate suffering. But with a system where microfinance is used responsibly to teach women and integrate tourism revenue within the community we can see the importance of using these sources to empower women living in poverty.

One of the most important things I learned through this process of communicating with NGO's was being professional and flexible with them using my Spanish. My entire education has been the practice for the day to come when would travel abroad and work globally using my languages. As a group we collected a vast amount of information from a diverse group of NGOs and in the end I found it to be absolutely worth it to meet and communicate with them. I think one very important skill you learn in college is how to be flexible when things do not go according to the original plan. These skills are the features that define the educated and people ready to work in the real world.

If you have any interest in terms of volunteering overall, just be prepared to expect the unexpected and be flexible because it will always appear something you did not anticipate. This process has benefited me immensely because I now have the power and no longer have any fear of reaching out to international representatives. All of the organizations who spoke to us were very kind, and I know now that NGOs highly appreciated our interest.