2015

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Recommended Citation

Pearl, Paige A. (2015) "Lessons in Haiti," *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

DOI: 10.5703/1288284315701

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjsl/vol2/iss1/16>

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PURDUE JOURNAL OF SERVICE-LEARNING AND INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Lessons in Haiti

Paige A. Pearl, College of Agriculture

On my recent service-learning trip to Haiti in December 2014, I traveled with 20 other students who composed five separate teams with a common goal of educating community members in Haiti about agriculture. I was a member of the crops team who intended to educate about basic agronomic practices while increasing our knowledge of agronomy in Haiti. We prepared a presentation and demonstration that we gave to over 100 community members at Université Anténor Firmin (UNAF), a university in Haiti. Our presentation focused on basic planting practices, such as recommended planting depths, row and seed spacing for corn and soybeans, as well as soil texture and times when irrigation is needed for plant health. In the demonstration, we expanded on the basic planting practices by having a field example and exhibited how to determine soil texture and moisture by hand, which is crucial to decide irrigation timing. The outcome was overwhelming, as we were asked many questions regarding agronomy and how community members could implement the ideas we were presenting. It was promising to see such interest from the people in Haiti and to take part in planning the use of practices presented with their current practices. More importantly, we gained a large amount of information about Haitian agriculture. Every place we visited we spoke to multiple people to increase our understanding of Haitian agricultural practices. The knowledge we gained from these conversations and experiences will help guide future students traveling to Haiti on available resources and what the Haitian community is working to improve. These experiences gave me many skills that will apply to my professional life. I could never have learned these skills

so quickly in a classroom setting, particularly nonverbal communication skills, flexibility, and awareness.

In terms of nonverbal communication, I learned that a language barrier is a small barrier to break. All it takes is a willingness to watch, learn, and speak to one another and a relationship can be formed. In the few days I was there I was able to learn a few words and phrases in Creole. These included: “Hello,” “How are you,” “What is your name,” “What is this,” and “I do/don’t like it.” Our culture is very diverse; communicating with those different from us can result in large gains in career opportunities.

In regard to flexibility, many times in Haiti we would spend too much time on scheduled activities. This meant reorganizing our time. There was no other option but to go with the flow and keep in good spirits.

Crops team during the symposium at the University of UNAF with translator Junior, a student at the university.

Symposium demonstration of seed and row spacing at the University of UNAF in Cap-Haitien, Haiti.

In the workplace you do not always have the choice to plan your task or day. Being flexible can make changes smoother for everyone.

I also gained a sense of awareness while in Haiti. Living in a nation where large-scale farming is the only way to meet demand, I assumed Haitians must be practicing agriculture incorrectly, but my perception was wrong. I observed that the Haitians practice agriculture efficiently in many ways, based on the resources available. Now, being back in the United States, I look at agricultural practices with a global perspective. Going into the agriculture industry, I view my new global perspective of agriculture as a large advantage over those who do not understand that agricultural practices can come in many forms. Overall, my trip to Haiti was life-changing and I gained more than I could have ever given.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgment is provided to my service project mentor, Dr. Mark Russell, and my writing mentor, Dr. Wei Hong.