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Holly M. Renner

Purdue University, rennerh@purdue.edu

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My Service-Learning Experience in Haiti

Holly Renner, College of Agriculture

During the winter break of my sophomore year of college, I went on a ten-day study abroad trip to Haiti. This service-learning experience was specifically designed to teach Haitian students and farmers about animal and food security in a college symposium. I was assigned to lead a designated “poultry team,” and our goal was to teach Haitian students and farmers how to raise chickens. During our ten-day stay, we toured farms, provided aid to an orphanage, climbed a historic mountain, traveled to a remote village, and were fully immersed in the culture and community. I learned many invaluable lessons that a traditional classroom could not offer. One of the most valuable was how to think like a Haitian.

When we first arrived in Haiti, I was not fully aware of the purpose of our schedule, but I found that each day had a specific purpose and lesson to be learned. For example, we provided a three-month supply of food to an orphanage. We bought the food from a market in Cap-Haïtien in order to create a ripple effect on the local economy. Through this act, we learned that aid needs to be given strategically to create the most good. I realized that we were creating the same effect with education. We clearly accomplished so much more than I had imagined from a two-day agriculture symposium.

My poultry team focused on incubation. During the agriculture symposium, we gave a presentation and addressed questions in order to teach students how to build their own incubator and successfully hatch chicken eggs. Even with a translator, getting my information across

proved to be difficult, but I learned how to negotiate the language barrier with hand gestures and facial expressions. I built up a mental thesaurus and became more adaptable when providing information.

Cultural immersion was a key component of this service-learning trip. By teaching students in Haiti, I realized that the concept of “culture” is more than language and lifestyle; it is a thought process. For instance, in the United States, we are privileged to have solid barns with high technology to raise chickens. In Haiti, this is not always the case due to poverty and the potential for natural disasters. As we were discussing the best way to build a chicken breeding facility, I suggested the use of simple materials like chicken wire and palm branches. At that point my professor exclaimed, “Now you’re thinking like a Haitian!”



The children in Haiti were rarely shy. We could not understand these curious kids, but it did not stop us from playing games and laughing with them. Courtesy of Valerie Scott.



After touring a chicken farm in Haiti we came back to find the bus surrounded by curious villagers. This soon turned into a game of hot hands with the children. Courtesy of Valerie Scott.

My experience in Haiti created memories and friendships that will last a lifetime. I gained a passion for service-learning, and I hope to return to Haiti one day. My only wish is that I would have studied abroad earlier in my college career.

Acknowledgments

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