

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING EXPERIENCES ABROAD



THE FORUM
ON EDUCATION ABROAD

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*See also, Campus Compact: Global SL. <https://compact.org/resource-posts/ftl/>

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INTRODUCTION

Whether a stand-alone program or one component of a course or program, community engagement experiences abroad present a unique set of benefits and challenges for students and institutions/ organizations. It is essential to ensure that the project(s) undertaken by visiting students are community-identified and driven. It is critical that institutions and organizations developing community engagement opportunities empower the diverse voices and perspectives in a community, rely on local expertise, and involve community members from a range of perspectives continuously. Throughout the process, institutions and organizations should prioritize the value of listening, learning, and working together with the host community, and avoid a results-oriented approach focused solely on specific timelines or deliverables.

The most effective community engagement experiences abroad offer reciprocal benefits to communities and students. In some cases, these benefits may be tangible, particularly for service learning and volunteer experience abroad, but in others, members of the host community and students may value the intangible benefits that often inform the education abroad experience, such as exposure to new cultures and perspectives, engaging in a shared learning experience to build mutual understanding and to grapple with complex global issues, and an opportunity for personal growth.

Community engagement programs by nature expose both students and host community members to differences in cultural and social norms. In some cases, this may also involve differences in access to resources and opportunities, as well as economic disparities. Intentionally structured community engagement experiences abroad can moderate preconceived notions and stereotypes about a country or community, and guide students to develop their listening and observational skills, along with a capacity for cultural humility.

Community engagement programs located in developing, immigrant, or marginalized communities require thoughtful collaboration and communication between the home institution, coordinating organization and the host community, with particular sensitivity to the dynamics of students from cultures of privilege working in communities with fewer material resources.

These Guidelines focus on community engagement but may be broadly applicable to other types of education abroad programming for considerations relating to host community perspectives and concerns. [The Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad](#) apply to all education abroad opportunities. Use them together to develop and assess community engagement experiences abroad.

To conduct education abroad programming in a way that promotes social, economic, and environmental well-being, refer to the guidelines for [Advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals through Education Abroad](#). For community engaged learning experiences with a health care connection, it is important to consult the [Guidelines for Undergraduate Health-Related Experiences Abroad](#) as well.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OR COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING

a course, internship, program or experience that enhances academic learning through reciprocal relationships with communities that offer opportunities to advance critical thinking, develop civic skills, and address public problems

Note 1 to entry: "Community engagement experiences" is used as the umbrella term for all community engagement, including service-learning and volunteer programs or smaller components of an education abroad program of any type.

COORDINATING ORGANIZATION

the institution or organization responsible for organizing and arranging the service/community engagement opportunities; this can be a college or university, a program provider organization, or an in-country NGO

EXPERIENTIAL SITE

setting where students' community engaged learning opportunity takes place

HOME INSTITUTION (OR HOME SCHOOL)

The educational institution where an education abroad student is a continuing student, usually working toward the completion of a degree

HOST ORGANIZATION

a local institution or organization that receives individuals or groups and offers opportunities and activities for community engaged learning, often through a structured internship placement or volunteer activity

HOST COMMUNITY

a group of people who live in the same locality or share common interests with whom students spend time and take part in community engagement opportunities; sometimes synonymous with experiential site

PARTNER

party involved in the processes of sending *students* (3.45) abroad or receiving students abroad (when at least two parties are involved), including, but not limited to:

- home institution
- host institution
- independent provider
- consortium
- travel or logistics provider
- government agency
- scholarship organization

SERVICE-LEARNING

a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes

Note 1 to entry: As defined in Jacoby, B. *Service-Learning Essentials: Questions, Answers and Lessons Learned* (2015).

VOLUNTEERING

largely self-directed, unpaid work or service-based learning opportunities initiated by students motivated to respond to the needs of an organization or community, often without specific learning objectives or associated coursework

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

4.1* MISSION AND GOALS

*For ease of reference, sections are numbered to match the corresponding clauses of the [Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad, 6th Edition](#).

- a. Establish that the primary student learning objective for community engagement experiences is to provide students with opportunities to develop intercultural skills and an understanding of complex global issues through a historical and local context and get to know and learn from the local communities by working alongside them in purposeful ways.
- b. Institutions and organizations must ensure that their programs contribute to local projects, requirements and priorities.
 1. The host community should drive the articulation of goals, including what they will contribute to students' learning and what they expect to learn from students.
 2. Consider how the program contributes to local and global sustainable development.
 3. Include local knowledge and expertise to enrich the learning experience.
- c. From the early stages of the planning, discuss the long-term goals with your host community and clarify expectations around the length of engagement and eventual outcomes.
- d. If the community engagement experience is a part of a larger course or program, ensure that it is tied to the learning objectives established for the course or program.
- e. Clearly articulate how the community engagement experience relates to, supports, and enhances the goals of the organizations in the host community and the institution or education abroad organization's mission and goals.

4.2 COLLABORATION AND TRANSPARENCY

- a. Make local community members equitable partners and rely on local knowledge in all stages of developing, implementing, and evaluating the experience.
- b. Set and communicate clear, realistic, and honest expectations to students, faculty, host communities, and other stakeholders.
- c. Engage with recognized and established community organizations on-site, including governmental and non-governmental agencies. Program development should empower, not avoid, ignore, displace, disregard, or circumvent local organizations and professionals.
- d. Select coordinating and host organizations with the following criteria in mind:
 1. Adherence to international, national, and local laws
 2. Comprehensive health, safety, security, and risk management policies to protect participants' and community members' health and well-being
 3. Capacity to manage, mentor, and supervise volunteers
 4. Commitment to placing volunteers in appropriate roles
 5. Awareness of cultural differences, as well as dynamics related to equity, diversity and inclusion that may arise in the interaction between participants and the host community, and policies and procedures for mitigating and addressing potential conflicts
 6. Commitment to accessibility for participants and members of the host community
 7. Commitment to the social and economic well-being of the community and environmental sustainability, in keeping with the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#)

- 8. Commitment to pursuing a continuity of engagement with the host community when participants are unable to be present, to the extent possible
- e. Clearly articulate contributions of all involved organizations, institutions, and individuals. Reciprocity of value is supported by local experts understanding how they contribute to student learning and students understanding how they will contribute to meaningful outcomes in the community.
- f. Articulate clear expectations regarding roles and responsibilities, particularly around health, safety, and security of the participants as well as members of the host community; partnerships may be dissolved by either party and participants removed from the site if articulated expectations are not met.
- g. Involve experiential sites and host organizations in the interview and student selection process as much as possible (or as desired by host organization), so that both student and host have as much information as possible prior to the community engagement experience.
- h. Ensure that all parties receive relevant background information about one another prior to arrival to facilitate faster and more effective integration of students on-site.
- i. Provide support for clear and efficient communication among the participants, the experiential site, and the coordinating organization, and between the home institution and the coordinating organization.

4.3 ETHICS

- a. Ensure the identified needs and assets of the community, as determined by a wide range of community members, are upheld and prioritized within the academic program aims and objectives.
- b. Minimize harmful effects, and evaluate potential harmful, unintended consequences by asking questions such as:
 1. Will the program take away the livelihood of locals, or duplicate or undermine existing services or resources?
 2. Will the program result in the extra use of limited resources?
 3. Could the host community become dependent on the services and/or resources provided by volunteers?
 4. How will the work be sustained and advanced after the students depart?
 5. What source of information is used to answer the questions above? Are local members of the community involved?
- c. Strive to build long-term relationships between institutions, organizations, and communities to ensure sustainable mutual benefit for all parties involved.
- d. Prioritize human dignity and community autonomy such that educational agendas of the student or the home institution are not prioritized over community safety, autonomy, and dignity.
- e. Recognize the risk of paternalism, exploitation, and neocolonial behavior on behalf of institutions/organizations from resource-rich environments when engaging with partners in low material resource settings.

- f. Recognize the implicit power differential that exists in educational partnerships that involve partners with disparate levels of resources and influence, as well as the potential impact of the program and student presence on local and organizational resources, economics, and social/cultural/political power hierarchies; consider these factors when making program-related decisions.
- g. Research and investigate the community engagement opportunity, organization, and/or issue to understand the implication of potential program activities on local communities and individuals, particularly for activities relating to health care settings, childcare settings, and work with vulnerable populations.
- h. When the project involves work with vulnerable and/or low-resource communities, ensure that participants receive training appropriate for work with vulnerable populations.
- i. Match student capacity, including knowledge, skills, and competencies, with the capacity necessary for the experience so that community wellbeing is not compromised.
- j. Instruct students on appropriate use of technology/social media and sharing information about the experiential site and community members.
- k. When students are involved in research, assure that all projects are reviewed by the appropriate oversight bodies for every entity involved before any research activities begin.
- l. Clearly articulate the physical and emotional demands of the community engagement experience to allow students to make an informed decision about their participation in the work on-site.
- m. Honor the ethical obligation to ensure that all experiential site staff who have contact with the participants understand their level of education and qualifications (or lack thereof), as well as the appropriate nature, scope, and limitations of participants' activities.
- n. Investigate potential partner organizations and community engagement activities and their implications thoroughly before establishing a program; refuse to partner with organizations that permit uncredentialed medical care, orphanage volunteerism, or other activities that are harmful to individuals or communities. Direct engagement with children in residential facilities/orphanages is discouraged.
- o. Ensure that initiatives and projects provide sustainable feasibility and outcomes that benefit the host community.
- p. Ensure the safety of the students and those with whom the students interact.
- q. Uphold the highest standards of ethics, integrity, and professionalism among staff, faculty, students, and partners.

4.4 EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

- a. Strive to provide equitable access to community engagement opportunities to students and host community members.
- b. Offer multiple spaces to hear all stakeholder voices.
- c. Ensure that issues of team building, power and privilege, cultural adjustment, cultural bias, and conflict resolution that may arise among student groups and with community members are addressed in the development and delivery of community engagement experiences.

d. Inform the student of expectations and cultural differences that may impact their experience, including:

1. dress code
2. punctuality
3. interactions with experiential site staff and community members
4. language specific to the community engagement project
5. gender roles
6. attitudes toward LGBTQ+
7. interactions with members of the opposite sex
8. attitudes or stereotypes of foreigners (by community members)
9. racial/ethnic differences
10. social, economic, and political contexts of the experience
11. how to talk about culture, values, and political systems in their country of origin

ADMINISTRATIVE FRAMEWORK

5.1 POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND GUIDELINES

- a. Ensure that program policies, procedures and guidelines address issues related to team-dynamics, power and privilege, cultural adjustment, cultural bias, and conflict resolution that can arise among student groups and with community members.
- b. Confirm any visa requirements, restrictions, or authorizations for the community engagement component of the program activity, which may be different from traditional student visas.
- c. If the experience is credit-bearing, clearly communicate policies for the awarding of credit and identify who will evaluate the student on these criteria, which may include:
 1. Number of service/volunteer hours required
 2. Method of verifying hours
 3. Attendance in an in-person or online class or seminar, as required
 4. Readings, assignments, reflective journals, or other academic components as required
 5. Criteria, including deadlines, for evaluating assignments
- d. Ensure participants understand and comply with all applicable licensing and certification policies, visa policies, research ethics, and any other code or policy applicable to their program experience.
- e. Make students aware of their obligation to act appropriately and not engage in activities beyond their education, training, knowledge, and skills level. For community engagement programs with a health care connection, it is important to consult the [Guidelines for Undergraduate Health-Related Experiences Abroad](#) as well.

- f. Ensure that students are made aware in writing of consequences for acting unprofessionally or inappropriately in the experiential setting.
- g. Establish disciplinary measures to address students who engage in activities outside their scope of education, training, knowledge, and skills, and clearly articulate those disciplinary measures to students during orientation.
- h. Establish policies regarding consent and ethical use of photography, interviews, storytelling, and guidelines governing final products such as research results, reports, audio/visual products. These policies should also address the processes for sharing such projects with coordinating organizations and/or host communities when appropriate.
- i. Provide a point of contact for both parties (student participants and members of the host community) and procedures to follow in case of a health, safety, or risk management crisis.
- j. Review relevant individual participant physical and mental health information, including medical conditions and physical fitness level that may be necessary to do the community engagement work proposed, prior to the arrival on-site, to identify any special considerations or accommodations that might need to be taken into account.
- k. Establish and enforce a policy to protect children and vulnerable populations with whom students, faculty, and chaperones may interact.
- l. Develop an appropriate mechanism for evaluating local outcomes and local impact; regularly evaluate and assess all partners to ensure that goals and responsibilities are being met for the host community and participants.
- m. Develop processes for representatives and members of the host community to provide feedback to participants and/or the coordinating organization to ensure continued fit of the partnership.
- n. Ensure visual images and social media used in promotional materials and program information appropriately represent the community in which participants will be engaging fairly and with dignity, and accurately represent the student experience and the work they will do on-site.
- o. Ensure you have procedures or policies on the best way to responsibly and ethically leave a host community, or end a project or program.

5.2 FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES

- a. Ensure that programs have adequate financial, human, and facility resources to provide a learning environment and access to health services for students.
- b. Ensure sufficient funds and staff to effectively train faculty, staff, and/or chaperones to navigate issues of team-dynamics, power and privilege, cultural adjustment, cultural bias, and conflict resolution that can arise among student groups and with community members.
- c. Compensate all parties supporting participants fairly and in a mutually agreed upon fashion.
- d. Maintain appropriate staffing levels to train, oversee, and ensure the safety of students and members of the host community while at a community engagement site.
- e. Work with local experts who have knowledge of host community resources, values, customs, language, and opportunities.

- f. Provide fair compensation for all direct and indirect costs associated with the program and its projects, such as transportation, housing, food, clean water, translators and other staff, supplies, electricity, and other fuel.
- g. Ensure that faculty, staff, or chaperones working with community engagement programs are properly trained in working with host communities and the social, economic, and cultural contexts of the project at hand and prepared to help students navigate and reflect on the cultural, economic, social, and physical differences they encounter.
- h. Ensure that faculty, staff, students, and/or chaperones have passed appropriate background checks and are sufficiently skilled to participate in the community engagement experience.

STUDENT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

6.1 BEFORE PROGRAM

- a. Ensure students understand their learning and development goals specific to the on-site experience, host communities, and cultures.
- b. Ensure that faculty, staff, and/or chaperones are effectively trained to navigate issues of team building, power and privilege, cultural adjustment, cultural bias, and conflict resolution that can arise among student groups and with community members.
- c. Clearly articulate the expected knowledge and competencies needed to be successful in the host community setting, such as language and interpersonal skills, cultural knowledge, attitudes, and reasons for participating, and applicable academics, and how these will be measured.
- d. Clearly articulate the physical and emotional demands of the community engagement experience, as well as any additional health and safety risks related to the community engagement aspect of the program, to allow students to make an informed decision about their participation in the work on-site.
- e. Include in pre-departure and on-site orientation information about safety protocols when working at the host organization and in the host community, and training on what to do in specific case scenarios.
- f. Provide resources to prepare students for safety and legal considerations specific to the host community and the type of community engagement planned for the program.
- g. Ensure participants meet language competency requirements or that language services are available in the host community.
- h. Introduce reflection frameworks and provide structured sessions for students to reflect on their anticipated learning experiences.

- i. Provide students with the following information about the host community and their work there:
 1. Name and description of the host organization and community involved in the experience, as well as the scope and nature of the specific work in which participants will be engaged
 2. Respective roles of the student, the community engagement coordinator, members of the host community, and the home institution and/or sponsoring organization
 3. A description of the location and environment where the student will be staying during the experience, including climate, housing conditions, etc.
 4. Students' primary contact (coordinator or supervisor) on-site (name, email, phone number)
 5. Expected time commitment (schedule, hours per day, number of weeks)
 6. Requirements and competencies that will impact the student's success in the host community (skills, academic background, language ability)
 7. Expectations of professionalism and appropriate conduct unique to the host community's culture.
 8. Essential eligibility requirements related to the type of community engagement planned, including but not limited to: physical abilities, personal background checks, drug testing, confidentiality, privacy, and non-compete policies and agreements.
 9. Learning objectives for the experience specific to the type of community engagement planned.
- j. Provide ongoing orientation and teaching of relevant and appropriate skills and theory to ensure the health and well-being of both students and members of the community with whom they are interacting.
- k. Inform students of expectations, professional and cultural etiquette, social and political policies of the host country and communities, and cultural differences that may impact their experience, including but not limited to:
 1. Professional etiquette such as dress code, punctuality
 2. Language specific to the community engagement experience
 3. Social, cultural, environmental, economic, and political awareness of the host community and country such as gender roles, attitudes toward LGBTQ+, racial/ethnic differences
 4. Appropriate use of technology/social media and sharing information about the experiential site and community members
- l. Ensure a clear, direct line of communication between students and the staff or faculty member to contact in case of an issue or emergency on site.
- m. Make participants aware of the limits of resources of the host organization or host community, and outline how to be respectful of the resources they use. Check in regularly with host organizations and students during the program to ensure this is being done.
- n. Ensure students' understanding of their financial responsibilities while abroad, potential limits on financial resources of members of the host community, and expenses that are being covered by the program.

6.2 DURING PROGRAM

- a. Actively support students in respecting and honoring the host community's knowledge and strengths.
- b. Offer regular structured reflection sessions in collaboration with the host community throughout the experience.

- c. Encourage students to reflect on how the community engagement experience is contributing to their academic and personal development and worldview.
- d. Remind participants of the limits of resources of the host organization or host community, and outline how to be respectful of the resources they use. Check in regularly with host organizations and students to ensure this is being done.
- e. Ensure and continuously remind students of expectations, cultural differences and professionalism of the host community/ organizations.
- f. Encourage students to immerse themselves in the day-to-day activities as structured by the host community/organization.
- g. Encourage students to consider how their presence impacts the host community, and how their departure will affect the progress made towards the host community's goals.
- h. Ensure participants are made aware that they are responsible for understanding their own limitations; educate and empower them to decline when asked to perform activities outside their scope of education, training, knowledge, and skills to protect themselves and the community.
- i. Encourage students to consult with host communities about ways to continue to stay involved or contribute to the host communities after returning home.
- j. Advise participants of the challenges, benefits, and ethics related to fundraising, donations, and other financial involvements of any initiatives that they may want to undertake related to the host community involved.
- k. Towards the end of their time on-site, encourage students to prepare themselves to re-enter their home communities.

6.3 AFTER PROGRAM

- a. Design opportunities for students to critically reflect on the social, economic, political aspects of the host community and how they might impact students' academic, personal, professional, and academic growth, and worldview.
- b. Offer assistance in connecting students' international community-engagement experiences with local community-engagement programs and opportunities.
- c. Design post-program evaluations that ask students to articulate how their participation in community engagement experiences results in reciprocal benefits to local communities and participants.
- d. Encourage students to identify ways to support their host communities and stay involved after returning home.
 - 1. Offer students resources and guidance to follow up on the host community-identified projects.
- e. Develop mentoring opportunities for returned students to coach new students so that the community-based projects can continue.
 - 1. Offer opportunities for returned students to participate or contribute to the pre-departure and post-experience course or programs.
- f. Prepare participants to articulate how their community engagement experience has impacted their interpersonal and intercultural development, as well as their career readiness.
 - 1. Consider creating showcase opportunities for participants to share their experiences and practice these skills.
- g. Encourage university faculty and/or staff to collaboratively evaluate and assess learning outcomes with the host communities and/or organizations.