Good Works – 
Changing (with) Civic Engagement at Duke University

By

Frances Aunon

Department of Cultural Anthropology
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

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Professor Diane Nelson
Professor Heather Settle
Professor Kathryn Whetten
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Introduction

What had I gotten myself into? I was a fresh nineteen year old, sitting on a plane in the Miami airport, about to fly out of the comforts of the United States, and to live and volunteer in Costa Rica for two months. I went through the mental checklist of the essentials: passport, wallet, journal, bug spray, sunscreen, and deodorant. One last call to my boyfriend, one final text home, and then the flight attendants announced to turn off all electronics, my cell was as good as dead for the next two months.

I was excited to be going somewhere new, ready for a new adventure, but at the same time apprehensive. I knew it would be an incredible experience, but I was still nervous; nervous to be committing to live somewhere foreign for such a long period of time. What happened if I didn’t like it?

Although the plane was hardly moving, my thoughts were racing as unanswerable questions flashed rapid fire through my brain – Where would I be living? Would my host family like me? What happens if my ride doesn’t meet me at the airport? Would my Spanish be enough to get by? How homesick would I get? What will I do if I get sick? Would I get internet? How would I handle the stresses of the slum?

While the nerves were still present, the possibilities seemed endless. I had been to La Carpio before. And now I was going back, ready to commit my whole summer to do what I could and make a difference. I had taken a few classes, heard what it was like to interact with different cultures, and I was ready to hit the ground running. I was going to do good work.

And before I knew it, the plane lifted off the runway, and I was off on my adventure, leaving the familiar behind, flying right out of my comfort zone.

When I embarked for my first long visit to Costa Rica in the summer of 2007, I had a plan, but I really had no idea what I was getting myself into. This sentiment is not unlike that of many Duke students as they embark on a summer’s civic engagement project. “Challenge yourself. Change your world:” The objectives of DukeEngage may seem benign, but inherently possess and problematize civic engagement. Changing your world, for example, disregards the other inhabitants of the world that students are supposedly changing, and the provision of meaningful assistance can be debated. The wording of the slogan also reveals the assumption that all change that the
students can make will have a positive effect on the community. But, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, that is not necessarily the case.

Civic engagers want to do “good” – to change the world and make a difference. And they want to do “work,” - to act, to change their surroundings and be changed by the experience. These factors are mutually constituting, as the notion of what is “good” defines how they “work,” and how they “work” redefines what they believe is “good.” It feels good to help – there is a desire to improve the situations of others, and doing so makes you feel fulfilled. But is civic engagement entirely benevolent? Are good intentions good enough?

Doing “good works” also carries the connotation of charity work, helping the poor by converting them to religious, political, economic, or social ideals that the “do gooder” knows and the receiver does not know. This religious association taps into altruistic and paternalistic power dynamics that characterize the relationships between high income countries and low and middle income countries. In an address to college students before they embarked on civic engagement project in Mexico, Ivan Illich, a Catholic priest, philosopher, and economist, warned the students that all forms of civic engagement perpetuate the disparate power dynamic, “exporting idealists” who “[seduce]’ the ‘underdeveloped’ to the benefits of the world of affluence and achievement” by engaging in the “delusive ballet” that only “creates disorder” (Illich, 3). He states that the ignorant university students will take advantage of the marginalized population, and further neo-imperialist practices that initially oppressed the low income countries and reinforce the political structures that compound the fiscal dependency of the low income countries on the high income countries.
Civic engagement projects can, as Illich argues, compound existing power relations and may actually harm the people they intend to help. But at the same time, not all civic engagement projects are harmful. Many students have a change in perception and the civic engagement projects accomplish the university’s goals to create more global citizens. But just as the civic engagers are changed by the experience, the communities and institutions are changed by this interaction in a way that has the potential to alter the structural inequalities and assumptions that currently undergird the enterprise.

When I left to work in La Carpio, Costa Rica, it was true, I had no idea what adventure awaited. I had a plan—I was going to work with the children to reduce the xenophobia—but when I arrived, I found myself doing something completely different. Looking back on my experience that summer, and the summer after that, I realize how much I grew from the experience, but also recognize the potential for negative consequences that Illich warns about. I recognize what an impact working in La Carpio had on my life, but also how that involvement might cause harm to the community.

**What is La Carpio?**

La Carpio is a 236-square-kilometer urban settlement outside of San José, the capital of Costa Rica. La Carpio is situated on an inclined terrain, with the declining altitude corresponding with the diminished living conditions. The ‘upper’ part is more developed, as the main roads are paved, albeit riddled with potholes, and the majority of the houses and shops have concrete floors. The houses generally have tapped into the electrical lines to power lights and TVs, and streams of sewage are covered by concrete slabs flank the streets. Some wealthier establishments have flushing toilets, but most have a tube system depositing the waste directly outside the house, often creating
problems for the neighbors. There is a considerable amount of trash in the street, but few larger pieces of debris. As you travel farther into La Carpio, the living conditions worsen. Since so many people tap into the central water lines, they have become and no longer transport clean water. Most of the houses have dirt floors and have constructed walls out of corrugated tin sheets and plywood. Most of the streets are unpaved, and are covered with accumulated plastic bags, litter, and unidentifiable matter that does not appear to be biodegrading anytime in the next ten years. Because of the gradual incline, there is a progressive accumulation of liquid and solid waste traveling down to the river at the base of La Carpio.

Approximately 25 years ago, Nicaraguan immigrants first settled on the property, setting up houses of corrugated tin sheets. Since then, there has been a huge influx of immigrants and the population is currently over 34,000 people. The population is comprised of both Nicaraguan immigrants, many of whom are undocumented, and Costa Ricans who have either been pushed out of San José or are too poor to live in the city. With the job market in Nicaragua still recovering from the United States Contra War, many were having trouble supporting their families, and crossed the mountains into Costa Rica with few resources, hoping to find more employment opportunities and services to provide a higher quality of life for themselves and their families. Most of the Nicaraguan immigrants were drawn to the markedly improved job climate, universal public health care system, and free public education of Costa Rica.

“Since Costa Rica is the signatory to national treaties guaranteeing the right to education, healthcare and livable housing to all those who live in the country, these immigrants were able to receive free public education, a chance for adequate health care, infrastructure improvements in their communities and opportunities to search for work.” (“Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation”)

However, when the Nicaraguan immigrants come to Costa Rica, the reality often does not meet their optimistic expectations. Because they are not documented inhabitants of Costa Rica, it is difficult for them to express their needs and access government services, and easy for the Costa Rican government to ignore them entirely. Since the Nicaraguan immigrants do not have Costa Rican papers, they are not included in the census when determining where to place schools and hospitals. Schools are overcrowded, and require books and uniforms for attendance, which are often too expensive for the families to afford. This influx of Nicaraguan immigrants poses a problem for the Costa Rican health care system because they use the medical facilities for
emergency situations, but do not pay the taxes that allow the government to provide the services. Although this is a concern, many of the Nicaraguan immigrants do not use the health facilities because they are afraid they will be asked for their Costa Rican identification papers and deported back to Nicaragua. Consequently, they often wait for ailments to turn into true emergencies before seeking medical attention at a hospital.

The majority of Nicaraguan immigrants do not have national identification papers and consequently receive approximately a third of the salary paid to Costa Ricans in comparable construction and housekeeping jobs because the lower end jobs are in such high demand. If a Nicaraguan immigrant believes s/he deserves a higher salary, his/her employer can simply find someone who is willing to fill that position for the lower salary. Costa Rica’s Mixed Social Aid Institute has estimated the monthly income of the majority of La Carpio’s families at between 60,000 and 75,000 colons (US$130-165), not enough to cover the cost of basic provisions and services for a family of six, according to the National Statistics and Census Institute” (Varas, 4). The power discrepancy between the Costa Ricans and the Nicaraguans prevents the Nicaraguans from feeling as though they have much agency in the situation, because the Costa Ricans have the power to turn them in to the authorities and have them repatriated. Any income is better than nothing, so the Nicaraguan immigrants generally work the jobs at the lower salary and make do the best they can.

Based on my observations in the field and interviews with women in La Carpio, I learned that the many people had different expectations for living in Costa Rica. While most of the families consider La Carpio to be a transitory phase before settling into a more stable lifestyle, the majority of the families have lived there for eight to ten years. Although they recognized that La Carpio was far from their ideal living situation, the
inhabitants appeared complicit, as though they had accepted their current situation as their general state of being, and had little agency in changing the status quo. Although some are invested in community improvement, many do not see La Carpio as home and consequently, have little initiative to work to improve existing conditions. La Carpio is a transient, capricious community.

More and more Nicaraguans and poor Costa Ricans come to La Carpio, some return to Nicaragua, while a select few move elsewhere. Such transitions make it difficult to develop a sense of identity – to foster a sense of pride in being a resident of La Carpio.

Although there is a constant influx of new immigrants, I perceived that the inhabitants generally consider La Carpio as a static place, with few opportunities for social, economic, or financial mobility. A strong degree of xenophobia, or culturally reflected tension, between the Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans permeates many aspects of life in La Carpio, hindering social and economic mobility. Whenever La Carpio is portrayed in the news or discussed in social settings, it is represented in an extremely negative light, analogous to the treatment of Mexican immigrants in the United States. There is a perception that Nicaraguans, and consequently La Carpio, are foreign territories of unfamiliar cultural integration making them dangerous, a ‘frontier,’ to borrow Tsing’s terminology.

With its high concentration of Nicaraguans, La Carpio provides a safe(r) haven for Nicaraguan immigrants by minimizing interactions with Costa Ricans. Consequently, because of the xenophobic tensions, the Costa Ricans often have the perception that La Carpio is an extremely dangerous place. Between 1999 and 2004, newspapers in Costa Rica published an average of one article per week describing gang violence in La Carpio, resulting in a delusive fear of Nicaraguans and reproducing the
stereotypes of La Carpio as an extremely violent and turbulent place (Vindas, 3). There were two main consequences of the discussion of the gangs (referred to as “maras”):

“One was insistence on the idea that the repressive measures being imposed by neighboring countries to combat the maras would push their members into Costa Rica. The other, even more refutable focus was that poor communities such as La Carpio represented a breeding ground where gangs—which indeed do exist there and in other poor Costa Rican neighborhoods—could develop into maras. Several of the most influential media described the maras as the new threat to “peaceful” Costa Rica.” (Vindas, 3)

Such media contributes to the overall sentiment of fear and resentment associated with Carpio and Nicaraguans.

The Nicaraguan immigrants have responded to the negative Costa Rican attitudes by becoming more unified as Nicaraguans, creating a strong imagined community uniting the Nicaraguan immigrants. When I asked, the majority of the women and children replied that they were first Nicaraguan, then from La Carpio. This response is especially interesting coming from the children, many of whom were born in La Carpio and have never been to Nicaragua.

The debilitating xenophobia creates a tension that prevents the Nicaraguans immigrants from working their way out of La Carpio and improving their living conditions. Because they earn lower wages, they are often not able to afford the prices charged outside of La Carpio so they have created their own internal trade and bartering economy. As a result of the community is so socially excluded from the rest of Costa Rica, the livelihood of the inhabitants is dependent on a strong social network within La Carpio. The family-run businesses are mutually dependent, counting on the business from their friends and neighbors to support their families. This financial system creates a tangible sense of community between geographically defined areas. They are extremely dependent on their friendships in La Carpio to provide for their own wellbeing. When I
went to buy snacks with one of the women who taught at the CRHF community center, she explained how the system worked. For example, Family A will buy their rice from Family B in the hopes that they will reciprocate by buying their bananas, which, in turn would provide Family A the money to purchase beans from Family C, and so on and so forth. The social ties are a necessary means of survival, but they can also inadvertently prevent the families from improving their living conditions, because there is the understanding that any circumstantial wealth should be distributed among the social network (as it is a product of everyone’s cooperation).

Foreign Aid in La Carpio: Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation - One Among Many

In addition to this complex web of relationships lies a blanket of international volunteers – contributing to the complex and diverse social topography of La Carpio. The interaction between the Costa Ricans and Nicaraguan immigrants, in addition to the web of missionaries, civic engagers, volunteers and researchers creates an environment of friction, with people of different nationalities and different backgrounds all interacting in the same space. Tsing outlines a frontier as a wild place on the edge of time and space, a place of great opportunity, but also great despair (6, 30). Many foreign nongovernmental organizations and churches responded to meet the needs La Carpio that the government failed to adequately provide.

Besides the illegal and legal Nicaraguan immigrants, poor Costa Ricans, and a notoriously corrupt Costa Rican police force, there were a potpourri of volunteers, researchers, civic engagers, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and evangelists. American Christian congregations run partner churches in the upper, more developed
sector of the community, drawing their congregation from the lower La Carpio, and use the institutions as a means of distributing donations throughout the community and as a home-base for groups of American missionaries.

Within those groups, there are even different ways of interacting within the community contributing to the constant influx and outflow of bodies and resources. There are short term volunteer groups who generally travel to La Carpio through volunteer coordination agencies and generally stay for a week, short term individual volunteers who are generally backpackers who spend a week or two working at a variety
of different organizations, long term individual volunteers who work for two to three
months over the summer, and individuals completing research for their dissertation or
Fulbright scholarship who stay for a year or two. Even their motives vary. Some people
come strictly as volunteers whereas others come to conduct research. There were
individuals, like Mary¹, whose story I will share in Chapter 4, who came from the United
States to work in La Carpio but remained unaffiliated with any organization.

The CRHF began working in La Carpio in 1997 at the urging of a volunteer, and
now has developed three community centers doubling as supplementary educational
facilities, and a clinic (“The Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation”). The organization
is very connected with the community and serves as a primary connection between La
Carpio and Costa Rican resources, especially medical and educational facilities. Gail
Nystrom is the founder and president of the CRHF. Gail is originally from Virginia and
New Jersey and earned her masters in education. She was stationed in Costa Rica with
the Peace Corps in 1978 and has been working in Costa Rica for over thirty years,
establishing education programs throughout the country before working most
significantly in La Carpio. Gail is the only American employee with the CRHF and
believes in working collaboratively with local staff so they are invested in the projects
and aware of the community needs. The CRHF runs several women’s groups to promote
economic self sufficiency and a sense of community, organizes educational programs for
children of all ages to promote good hygiene and healthy living, reading, and structured
drama and soccer programs to keep the teenagers off the streets.

¹ Name changed.
The CRHF’s funding comes primarily from the volunteer groups who come to work in La Carpio during the summer. The volunteers make a mandatory donation to the CRHF which provides support for the organization and covers the cost of the homestay. Gail does not allow CRHF volunteers to live in La Carpio because she believes it can be a dangerous environment for someone who is not familiar with the demography of the slum -- especially young female volunteers -- the overriding demographic of volunteers. Instead, Gail places volunteers with families who are affiliated with the CRHF and live in more stable neighborhoods close to La Carpio. Although it might appear that living outside of La Carpio might create more distance between the volunteers and the La Carpio community, it often creates a productive way for the volunteers to take a step back from their daily work in La Carpio and talk through their experiences with their host family. Because the host families have a close relationship with Gail, they are able to provide guidance and support for the volunteers. I am not sure how the community feels about the volunteers not living in La Carpio.
This ‘pay as you go’ structure potentially influences the profile of volunteers, as it, in essence, turns civic engagement into a commodity that must be purchased in order to experience. The CRHF’s dependency on the continued involvement of volunteers creates an unfortunate environment where the CRHF must continue to entertain volunteers and market itself to potential volunteer groups in order to keep the organization functioning. This model of volunteering is not unique to the CRHF, and is used in many, if not most non-governmental organizations which accept volunteers, and is not necessarily bad. Although there are criticisms of the mandatory donation, the money paid by the volunteers is arguably one of the more useful contributions to the community based organization.

**What did I do in La Carpio?**

I have worked in La Carpio in many different capacities. I went to Costa Rica for a week as a freshman at Duke and was a short term volunteer/volunteer tourist, and then I participated in a community-based research program and returned to La Carpio as a researcher. Lastly, I was a seasoned long-term volunteer, having already earned my ‘street cred.’ My experience working in La Carpio from so many different perspectives and studying anthropology for four years positions me to write this paper.

When I was a freshman at Duke, I participated in the Global Health Focus, which was a program that allowed us to investigate a subject matter from several academic approaches. We had the opportunity to travel to Costa Rica for a weeklong trip over Fall Break to get an introduction to global health applications in the field. We never spent more than a day at each organization, and our week was peppered with fun touristy
activities, such as a zip-line tour through the forests of Turrialba and a hike to see Volcán Arenal.

We spent one day visiting the main CRHF community center and listened to Gail describe the living conditions in La Carpio, and how the organization was working to address community needs. Many families, she explained as we crammed onto the benches, could not afford the materials required for their children to attend school and hesitated to use the Costa Rican medical facilities for fear of deportation. They used a complex system of extension cords to power their homes and they desperately needed a sewage system to sequester the waste away from houses and high traffic areas. In light of these myriad needs, Gail asked us to identify the community’s most pressing concern. Straight out of our global health classes, we suggested fostering government representation, developing infrastructure, and alleviating xenophobia. Gail considered our suggestions and reprioritized our task: Water. They needed clean water.

Something clicked at that point, and everything I had learned in class started taking on a more human application. I understood global health was not just about what was happening in textbooks, but rather how it affected those on the ground. Gail’s close connections with the community showed me that there were different epistemological methods, or ways of knowing about La Carpio. With Gail’s emphasis on community based problem solving, I realized the importance of learning about the community through participant observation and talking with the community members. I really appreciated Gail’s philosophy of community involvement, and made the decision to return at some point during my Duke career.

After the Focus program, I was accepted into the Service Opportunities in Leadership (SOL) program through the Hart Leadership Program at the Sanford Institute
of Public Policy. SOL is “a nationally-recognized, intensive twelve-month leadership program for Duke undergraduate students which combines academic study, community-based research, critical reflection, and mentoring” (“About SOL”). The first course focused on “border crossing,” how to mediate differences when people from different backgrounds conflict when trying to solve a problem. I learned, from an academic standpoint, the importance of listening and how to work collaboratively with other communities. (Although these same principles could apply to domestic or international work, the majority of my class decided to travel to international locations.) I decided to work with Dana Freedman, a colleague from the course, and during the spring semester, and we started developing our community based research project with Gail.

When I worked in Costa Rica in the summer of 2008, I was asked to conduct a needs assessment of families living in a particular part of La Carpio to identify the community’s concerns and identify practical ways the CRHF might best serve the community. Dana and I considered this to be a relatively straightforward assignment, but we quickly realized that most women were reluctant to speak with us. So we tried a different approach and began showing up daily to color with children, slowly earning the community's trust. Dana and I began running a daily educational program for the local children to earn the trust of the mothers, predominantly teaching basic hygiene practices (how to wash your hands, brush your teeth, etc) and catching them up to the curriculum covered at the educational center provided by the CRHF.

By spending so much time in the community, we learned through our informal conversations that our simple series of questions about living conditions and basic needs were actually quite sensitive. We realized that asking how the community organization could best help them was also asking what the women were unable to provide for their
families. Asking them how long they had lived in La Carpio meant asking about the circumstances dictating their lives. Had we not spent time building trusting relationships, we would not have realized the implications of our questions, and the women would not have felt comfortable.

Once Dana and I began to gain the trust of the women in La Carpio, we conducted the needs assessment by interviewing women who lived by “El Rio,” or the river, one of the poorest regions of La Carpio. We identified and prioritized basic, safety, and medical needs of some families, documented familial structures, residences, and community leaders for future reference, and devised an organized plan of action of steps the CRHF could take to improve the overall ‘health’ of the community. Many of the women began
expressing concerns about being financially dependent on their frequently absent husbands. I brought their concerns to the community leaders. Together, we paired my knowledge of microfinance with their knowledge of the community to teach participants of existing women's groups to sew and sell handmade bags in order to gain greater financial agency. The women, long-mired in financial limbo and entrenched in day-to-day routine, had been unable to conceive alternative routes toward independence. Through the trusting relationships and through the partnership with community leaders, we developed with the community, we were able to discuss and implement such a solution. However, this outcome is also ambivalent because although we provided the women with a way to earn money, we also made them more dependent on the influx of volunteers, the consumers for their bags.

I really appreciated working with Dana in the field. La Carpio can be an intense place to work for me because it was so different from anything I had ever experienced and it was helpful to have someone there to help process the whole experience. The trip was exhausting in every sense of the word. It was always an adjustment to get accustomed to living in Spanish, letting my body adjust to the different diet, getting used to the smells, meeting new people, and acclimating to the early mornings. I often took a bus out to the beach over the weekend with some of the other volunteers. The weekends provided me with a little distance to process the week’s worth of experiences and stresses, and often felt like a breath of fresh air. It was nice to speak in English and hang out with other Americans.

While I appreciated my weekends away, the people I met in La Carpio were absolutely wonderful, which made it extremely difficult for me to leave. I remember crying on my way to the airport after my first summer. The summer was unlike anything
I had ever experienced. I had no idea what to expect flying over for my first summer in La Carpio, but I realized I would miss the women I interviewed, the children I taught, conversations with Gail, and the welcoming Latina culture of Central America. That was when my summer felt real, and I did not want to go. The only way I was able to actually leave the country was by promising myself I would find a way to come back.

I felt it was important to establish sustainable involvement with the community and continue the relationships I founded during my first summer in Costa Rica, and so the following summer, I applied for an individual grant from DukeEngage. I also wanted to bring a group back with me to help carry on that relationship between Duke students and La Carpio/CRHF. I chose the students based on their age so there could be at least one person younger than me who might be able to lead a group the following summer, interest in working in Costa Rica, and backgrounds. Three people responded to my emails, consistently came to meetings, and applied and were accepted for a DukeEngage individual project, so we were set. I briefed them on my past work, showed them the projects Dana and I completed, and before I knew it, we were back in Costa Rica.

Returning to Costa Rica provided me the opportunity to follow up the progress of the recommendations Dana and I outlined through our needs assessment, and see the progress of the educational program that we established. I was able to renew my research protocol and touch base with the women I interviewed the summer before. We saw that the majority of the children Dana and I worked with the summer before had continued to attend classes at La Libertad, the CRHF community center, and many of them began to attend classes at the public school in the more developed regions of La Carpio but were behind in their classes. Consequently, I worked with the current staff at La Libertad to
help create a tutoring program to help ensure that the children received the support and encouragement they needed to succeed in school.

I gained a new perspective of international volunteerism when I returned to La Carpio for that second summer. Since I was more familiar with what to expect from La Carpio and staying in the field for three months, I was able to pay more attention to the relationships between the volunteers and the community and observe the impact of the volunteers who came for a shorter period of time. I was in a position to see how the community responded to volunteers upon their arrival, how they interacted, and the overall community impact after the volunteers left La Carpio to return home.

I wanted to differentiate myself from the short term volunteers. I was a researcher, not a volunteer or a short term volunteer, and I certainly wasn’t proselytizing any religion like many of the evangelists. Yet, at the same time, I found myself interacting with the other groups of volunteers on an everyday basis. The four of us Duke volunteers interacted with primarily with volunteers from Dartmouth College, college graduates, and short term volunteers with the CRHF.

When I was back for my second summer, I felt like a seasoned volunteer and the other volunteers looked up to me because I had experience and knew some of the community members. I ‘led’ a team and people came to me with questions. When a group of short term volunteers came to La Carpio, Gail would often have me talk to the group, share my experience, and take them through parts of La Carpio. I always felt conflicted about my involvement with the short term volunteers. On one hand, it was empowering that Gail trusted me to represent the organization, and reflect the interests of the community. On the other hand, I felt uncomfortable to be associated with the very volunteers I tried so hard not to be related to.
Ivan Illich would have been appalled at the thought of my apprehensive 19 year old self sitting on the plane, totally unaware of the experience that awaited me. He would argue that I did not have the background to be responsible in the field, and my actions would only have negative effects on the community. And I acknowledge that I was unprepared. There is no way I could have anticipated the emotional and physical struggles, the uncomfortable moments when I realized my ignorant assumptions, and the joy I would feel from my relationships with the women and children I worked with in La Carpio. However, there are some lessons that can only be learned by doing. Contrary to Illich’s conclusions, though I would never argue that I accomplished the “perfect project,” I believe that I was able to have a constructive impact on La Carpio through my continued involvement for two summers.

I could understand Illich’s concern, but through my own experience, I was able to see how not all civic engagement projects have negative consequences. So that made me wonder: What is really the effect of civic engagement projects on the community? What kind of change really occurs in the field? Are good intentioned projects sufficient justification for positive impact? What are ways that the potential for harm can be reduced? These questions perplexed me, as I tried to put my experiences in conversation with the civic engagement critics, and I decided to explore them further through this thesis.

Methodology

In order to address the questions of what motivates students to participate in civic engagement, I conducted formal interviews with students who participated in a civic engagement project, whether it be over the summer, for a week over Spring break, or
consistently throughout their time at Duke. I asked them to tell me about the experience in the field – what went well, what made them feel uncomfortable, what they learned, and what they wish they had done differently. I inquired why they choose to participate in the project in the first place, and how they interacted with their host organization and community members in the field.

Hearing their accounts of struggles and accomplishments allowed me to understand how they conceptualized their role in the community, and how they attributed the outcomes of their summer. I interviewed each student once, but I also asked additional questions via email, which provided them with the opportunity to share more information that they might not have remembered during the initial interview. It was through this continued contact that I began to understand the individuals who conducted the civic engagement projects, and not simply the projects themselves.

Although I interviewed 10 students, I have decided to focus on the stories of four volunteers through the majority of this thesis. I wanted to allow you, the reader, to begin to understand the individual personalities of these different civic engagers as I feel it contributes a more personal dimension to the thesis. I chose the four interviewees based on the different perspectives and backgrounds they represent, and the fact that they were responsive during the interview and subsequent email conversations.

I also draw significantly from my writing from my time in Costa Rica. I journalled extensively when I worked in Costa Rica – it was my way to process what I was seeing in the field, attempt to make sense of my place in the community, and remember the experience. Aside from grammatical or adjustments in sentence structure, I have not altered the journal entries, and instead use them as reflections of my mentality
at a particular point of time. Because of that, some of the entries reflect a more
developed thought, whereas others reveal a more naïve perspective.

With all the discussion about the role of the civic engagers in the field, it was also
very important to me to provide a voice for the community organizations. Although I
was not able to talk with multiple community organizations, I did conduct several
interviews with Gail Nystrom, the founder of the CRHF. These conversations
complemented those with students and introduced many complexities with regards to the
role of volunteers in the field.

I was interested in exploring how the faculty’s perspective of the structure of civic
engagement compared to that of the students, so I conducted informal interviews with
several Duke faculty members who serve as leaders in undergraduate civic engagement,
as well as those who are more critical of the university’s role in the international
community. Although not quoted specifically, these interviews highlighted the level of
complexity surrounding civic engagement.

One limitation for this project is that I discuss the impact of civic engagement
projects on the community, yet I was not able to represent any of their original words or
opinions in the thesis due to time constraints.

**Chapter Outline**

In Chapter 1, I explore the shape of civic engagement both within the university,
and how it relates with other programs. What is civic engagement? Who participates,
and what factors motivate them to participate in a civic engagement project? Where does
civic engagement fit in the general array of projects on the university level and how do
other more established and historical forms of engaging with the low and middle income
countries world provide a lens for understanding what civic engagement really means in practice?

Chapter 2 is devoted to understanding the larger power structures that help define the relationships between high income, and low and middle income countries. I use the chapter to develop the ideas of imperialist nostalgia, promoting an exotic fascination with the poor, resulting in the glamorization of their living condition, and the White Man’s Burden, where the high income countries feel an obligation to “fix” the low and middle income countries, to provide them with the support to “catch up.” I complicate the dichotomy of “developed” and “developing” nations or communities which serve as the basis for both imperialist nostalgia and the White Man’s Burden, and draw attention to the process of defining fieldsites.

In Chapter 3, I explore the moment of personal transformation in the field. What happens when civic engagers and community members interact? How does that encounter change the identities of both parties involved? I also consider how that moment might be seen from the perspective of a community organization.

In Chapter 4, I explore the consequences of civic engagement projects. What kinds of harm can they cause, and why is it so difficult for civic engagers to acknowledge harm? I examine the forms of accountability that are present in humanitarian aid and at the university level and evaluate their effectiveness in preventing harm.

Ivan Illich shows that civic engagement should be stopped because it only reinforces the power discrepancy between high and low income countries, and I have come close to this conclusion myself at times in the process of writing. Upon reflection, however, I believe that through reforming the institutional structure of civic engagement,
it is possible to create a method that both minimizes harm and promotes personal development. Part of that transformation, however, is recognizing the potential negative consequences of civic engagement projects as well as the positive.
Chapter 1: Engaging with Civic Engagement

Frances: How do you define civic engagement?
Michelle: “Holy mother. Not expecting such a difficult question!”

Sitting down to submit a DukeEngage application, the application practically writes itself.

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**DukeEngage Application: Summer 2011**

Project Details
Please provide a summary describing your project (1 to 2 sentences):

This summer I hope to volunteer with _______ (community organization) in _____ (country name). Through this experience, I will provide ______ (skill) services to ______ (community organization), enabling them to more effectively achieve their goal of ______ (goal).

Please enter the main location for your project:
______ (City, Country)
Will your project involve travel outside of the US?
_____ (Yes)

1. Explain your rationale for choosing this thematic area of service. (200 words maximum)

I choose ________ (thematic area of service) because it aligns with my interests in ________ (interest). I am also interested in how ______ (interest) is a changing field, and would be exciting to examine on a closer level. This interest is reflected both in my coursework and extracurricular activities. For example, ______ (name drop professors and discuss extracurricular activities).

7. What do you hope to accomplish with your community partner that would not be achieved without your assistance? (125 words maximum)

I hope to ______ (action) that the ______ (community organization) could not achieve without my assistance because of its limited capacity, ______ (list other limitations).

11. Describe an experience you have had that demonstrates one of the following characteristics:
open-mindedness, flexibility, or adaptability. (250 words maximum)

My ______ (open-mindedness, flexibility, or adaptability) was demonstrated through my involvement with ______ (Duke student group). For example, ______ (insert story where you represented the rational thinker). My ability to demonstrate ______ (open mind., flex. or adapt.) will help me face the challenges I will face working with ______ (community organization) in ______ (country).

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² These questions were taken directly off the 2010 DukeEngage application, but do not represent all the material asked in the application.
DukeEngage is the public face of civic engagement at Duke. Whenever I mentioned ‘civic engagement’ during an interview, the participants immediately began talking about DukeEngage and did not discuss other undergraduate project funding programs unless I prompted them to do so. DukeEngage is the largest summer funding program at Duke University, and it is drawing considerable attention to ‘civic engagement’ and changing the scope of undergraduate involvement in international communities.

According to Eric Mlyn, the head of the Duke Center for Civic Engagement, nearly fifty percent of students spend time abroad during their undergraduate careers at Duke, a significant increase from previous years and a much higher percentage than other collegiate institutions. DukeEngage aims to:

“Empower students to address critical human needs through immersive service, in the process transforming students, advancing the University’s educational mission, and providing meaningful assistance to communities in the U.S. and abroad.” (“About DukeEngage”)

The program was initiated in 2007 with a $15 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and $15 million from the Duke Endowment, and currently funds 360 undergraduate summer experiences per year. DukeEngage assignments vary tremendously, both structurally and thematically. There are group projects at designated DukeEngage sites where projects are mentored by Duke faculty and have on-site coordinators, and individual projects that serve as a platform for volunteering and student research at a proposed location. The majority of the programs are international project sites, but DukeEngage does run domestic based programs in Durham, New Orleans, and Washington, among other cities in the United States.
Civic engagement is the hottest trend on campus – it’s flying from program descriptions to resumes. Poster kiosks are plastered with advertisements for DukeEngage projects, information sessions, and visiting speakers. My email inbox is flooded with emails from the Duke Partnership for Service, Habitat for Humanity, Duke University Union, and the Duke Global Health Institute about ways to get involved in civic engagement projects.

Civic engagement appeals to our generation because it sends the message that by participating in a civic engagement project, you have the potential to create change. It is more than the standard community service performed in high school. Duke graduate Kathy Choi describes how the Millennial generation embodies the notion of change:

“Millennial envision and articulate a vision of the world that has been shaped by a culmination of forces: a perfect concoction of the belief in the power of American intervention as a force of good, a multifaceted boost in resources and opportunities for civic engagement, a vision of social change free of ideology, humanitarian and development projects, a turn away from the cynicism and apathy that defined Generation X, and a certain degree of historical amnesia that forgoes concerns regarding past failed efforts.” (Choi, 12)

There is something special, flashy and special about civic engagement that appeals to adolescents who seem to share the common desire to gain agency and make a difference. Even Barack Obama appealed to the Millennium generation by using “change we can believe in” as his campaign slogan to persuade young adults to go to the polls. But this call for change is also reflected in the appeal and popularity of civic engagement.

At Duke, there is a plethora of programs, grants, and projects available to undergraduate students to pursue service projects. The Service Opportunities in

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3 Although my focus for this thesis is Duke University, civic engagement has become popular at several other collegiate institutions. When I Googled searched for “civic engagement” and “university,” a whole page of “____ University Center for Civic Engagement” entries were listed.
Leadership program (SOL) encourages accepted students to delve deeper into how the backgrounds of different groups affect their perceptions of the world, conduct a community-based research project in the field, and trains students to practice leadership in the field. The Duke Global Health Institute (DGHI) funds and mentors accepted students at many project sites often connected with the research of a professor affiliated with the DGHI. The Mellon Undergraduate Award is a stipend awarded to students with research proposals for projects in Latin America. The Office of Service Learning (OSL) is a small but involved office that provides connections for students to engage in the local community in Durham.

Each of these programs has a different rhetoric to describe their work. DukeEngage funds students to conduct ‘civic engagement’ projects. Service Opportunities in Leadership (SOL) trains students in ‘community-based research.’ Students conduct ‘research’ with Duke Global Health Institute (DGHI) project sites, and ‘volunteer’ with the Office of Service Learning (OSL). Despite the different terminology, all of the aforementioned programs appear to be linked by the common thread of civic engagement: they provide students with the opportunity to actively participate in the community and help address identified problems, whether through research or volunteering, consistent with the American Psychological Association’s definition of civic engagement, as “Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern.” These different programs share underlying

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4 Leadership is a charged word, because just as a leader is defined, so is a follower. It taps into a set of power dynamics implying that the leader should guide the followers to change their actions. According to SOL, leadership is placed in the context of the community, so that helps taper the power discrepancy between the leader and the followers, however the discrepancy is still important to consider.

5 By providing a definition for civic engagement, the American Psychological Association discursively produces the object. This reification, or “thingification” causes “civic engagement” to take an a reality, when in fact, it could simply be an object of discourse.
structural similarities which allow me to refer to them as a collective group of civic engagement programs⁶.

Although civic engagement is marketed as a new and vibrant way of creating change, in reality, the distinctions from other forms of community involvement are hazy. It can be difficult to differentiate a civic engagement project from, for example, volunteering, service work, or research. One of my informants, Michelle⁷, acknowledges the appeal of the civic engagement label, and expands upon the difference between ‘civic engagement,’ ‘volunteering,’ and ‘service,’ concluding that the representation and characterization of the project might depend on the context and audience.

*Michelle:* Perhaps DukeEngage and the institutions that create these types of opportunities use the term "civic engagement" because it sounds flashier than just saying "volunteering." I just think people like to use "civic engagement" instead of "volunteering" and "service" because it sounds better. It looks more prestigious if you say, "I participated in a civic engagement project" than, "Oh, yeah, I volunteered over there."

Michelle highlighted the prestige and consequent appeal of labeling a project as ‘civic engagement’ as opposed to ‘volunteering.’ If it is difficult to establish a clear-cut boundary among civic engagement, volunteering, and service, does that mean civic engagement is just Volunteering 2.0 - a “new and improved” term repackaging an old idea and an old university’s brand to emphasize the element of change so appealing to college students? It might be helpful to think of civic engagement as an adjective instead of a noun - a different way of describing a project that might also be characterized as a volunteering or community service project. The label of civic engagement adds value to

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⁶ In conducting interviews and writing this thesis, I have struggled with how to best refer to both the programs, and the types of projects those programs support. From here on out, I will refer to projects sponsored by undergraduate funding programs as “civic engagement projects”, and the students who partake in the projects as “civic engagers” because of the all encompassing definition of the term by the APA.

⁷ Name changed.
the experience, creating a “socially conscious” university, and a “well qualified” student applicant. However, she argues that ‘civic engagement’ is a term circulating in more academic circles, and does not mean much to ‘normal people,’ like her parents.

**Frances**: In what context would you frame a project as civic-engagement, community service, or volunteering?

**Michelle**: If I were working with a community partner, I wouldn't go in and say I was doing a "civic engagement" project. If I told my mom I was taking a class called “The Politics of Civic Engagement”[^8], she would have no clue what that means.

I'd be very hesitant to use that term outside of an academic class, or like a situation where I'm expected to be a Duke college student, because I think, a lot of times, people don't know what that word means. I think it's very much something that's used within academia.

With respect to DukeEngage, I sat in the Link and built a website. I could describe that as "I worked to build this new form of communication to provide a service[^9] that is ultimately beneficial to their community, because it lets them connect with existing services..." et cetera. And of course, that's what I say in [academic] situations. But in reality, it's just like, "I sat in the Link, and a clicked on buttons and made a website." Not that big a deal.

Why is it uncomfortable to describe a project as ‘civic engagement’ to the community members? Is it simply because ‘civic engagement’ is a relatively new term and not understood in all circles, or could it be because there are some pretentious and elitist overtones? Labeling an action as ‘civic engagement’ makes the project appear more prestigious in academic circles, and widens the power gap between the students and the community.

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[^8]: Politics of Civic Engagement is a course taught by Professor Bob Korstad out of the public policy department at Duke. It addresses the political environment surrounding civic engagement.

[^9]: There is a contradiction between Michelle’s definition and example of civic engagement. In her definition of civic engagement, she states civic engagement “is not something that just provides.” Here, Michelle provides the example of how she could frame her work as a civic engagement project, saying she “worked…to provide a service.” The fact that she contradicted herself over the course of the interview is indicative of the larger structural problems with coping with a vague definition of the term “civic engagement.”
But what is civic engagement anyways? As Michelle points out, not all civic engagement projects cause the individuals to engage. Sometimes the projects involve no human contact at all. And how does it fit in with the general discourse surrounding humanitarian aid? If civic engagement is not explored within the context of other forms of engagement with the recipients of projects, then it might be more difficult for program participants to conceptualize how their actions interact with the power relationship. For as many programs that incorporate a theme of civic engagement, current Duke students had a surprisingly difficult time pinning down a precise definition, which highlights the wide scope of interpretations of civic engagement at Duke.

In order to understand how civic engagement is conceptualized, I asked my informants what civic engagement meant to them. When I asked how they defined civic engagement, there was laughter, long pauses, and an initial aversion to answering the question. Michelle even said, “Holy mother. Not expecting such a difficult question!” Not only did they all struggle to define civic engagement, but they all provided slightly different definitions of the term:

**Erica**\(^{10}\): Um, I don’t know…It's like going somewhere to give back to the global community, it could even be research…you have to be at least in the mentality of giving back.

Erica continually emphasized civic engagement as a moral obligation to those less fortunate. By keeping the focus on ‘giving back’ to the community, she assumes people participate in civic engagement because they have an obligation to help those less fortunate and have a desire to help serve others. Using this definition of civic engagement, successful projects would be those that made a difference in someone’s life. For example, Erica feels like she is able to make more of a difference volunteering in

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\(^{10}\) Name changed.
“developing” regions of China than in more developed regions of South Korea, her home country.

Whereas Erica dwelled on the emotional side of civic engagement, Michelle struggled with the political nature of civic engagement. Michelle was taken by surprise at the question, and struggled to differentiate civic engagement from other terms used to describe similar projects. She finally settled on a discussion on the political nature of civic engagement.

Frances: Why is it so difficult to define? [laughs] We use it all the time on campus.

Michelle: There’s not a clear-cut boundary between civic engagement, volunteering, and service in general. I feel like there’s a lot of overlap.

Perhaps some people would argue that civic engagement is a step beyond volunteering, in the sense that you’re not just providing something but you’re also actively working to create a change.

And I think [civic engagement] can be defined as something that’s directly political, or something that’s maybe not so political. Volunteering to clean up a neighborhood and developing a program to provide services to a community are definitely a civic engagement project. So I guess I would say [civic engagement] doesn’t have one coherent definition. It’s just more of a loose term that can be applied in different ways.

If civic engagement is defined as a civic duty, participants would act in order to reduce the inequality gap because of their political obligation of being wealthier. It is also interesting to note that Michelle assumes that cleaning up a neighborhood is not a political act. I believe that whenever someone is providing a service and another person is receiving a service there is an uneven power dynamic and an inherently political situation. (I discuss the power relations more in depth in Chapters 2 and 3.) Throughout our communication via interview and email, Michelle did not use “civic engagement,” and instead described her projects in terms of “service,” “work,” and “volunteering.”
Throughout her civic engagement projects, Michelle is very aware of the potentially political nature of a civic engager’s presence in the field.

Leah\footnote{Name changed.} takes a more concerted look to consider the application of skills, and skill development, and suggests a project sites should be chosen based on the civic engager’s capabilities to fix the community’s problems.

\textbf{Leah: } Um […] I think, for me, it would be using my skills to help other people unleash their resources and ultimately help themselves. I almost think it’s a democratic responsibility, and that on top of that you can build your morals. You’ve been given your livelihood, so you should give back to those for as much as you’ve been given.

She defines the community like a problem to be solved, a group needing to be taught the skills in order to improve themselves. This mentality is evidenced through her emphasis on fixing the problems of the Belizean communities she worked with over Spring Break. Interestingly, Leah says she wants to “unleash” the resources, but does not consider who or what “leashes” them in the first place.

Even though these responses only represents just three definitions opinions of civic engagement, their reactions highlight three interesting points: 1) despite their different unique backgrounds, they were all surprised by the question and grappled with the question before providing rather inarticulate responses, and 2) they all had a slightly different angle of defining civic engagement, and 3) none of the interviewees’ definitions address structural problems. One reason that the interviewees might have had a difficult time defining civic engagement is because the definition is not readily available, and even when published, remain vague. Surprisingly, I was unable to find a definition of civic engagement on either the Duke Center for Civic Engagement or DukeEngage website.
The ambiguous and nebulous definition of civic engagement allows students to approach their projects with several different objectives. Definitions delineate ideal outcomes, so if all of the civic engagers have a different definition, there might be just as many conceptions of ideal outcomes as there are people. Erica can use her ideal of moral obligation to give back to the community, Michelle can rectify the imbalanced political situation, and Leah can help “fix” a community through fostering skill development.

**Who are Civic Engagers? - Profile of Interviewees**

I interviewed several people for this project however I would like to profile Michelle, Jessica, Erica, and Leah\textsuperscript{12}, who provide the most significant contributions to my thesis. Each represents a slightly different perspective and is indicative of the range of individuals involved in the civic engagement landscape at Duke. The majority of the students who participate in civic engagement projects at Duke are women, which is indicative of a larger set of social and gender expectations.

*Michelle: I think [the focus of the domestic nature] is shifting. Instead of white middle-class women staying at home and taking care of their kids, white middle-class women are supposed to go out and take care of a lot of times the world’s kids. They’re supposed to go save poor black kids in Africa and poor racial minorities in other parts of the world.*

Women are also gender inferior to men, and so it is easier for them to understand the situation of disadvantaged populations. It is important to understand the backgrounds of these individuals because their own personal life histories affect how they conceptualize their role in civic engagement. All of the informants are women, and they represent various socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, and nationalities who share a participation in civic engagement.

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\textsuperscript{12} Names changed
Profile #1 – Leah

Leah comes from a middle-upper class family in Durham, where she attended a magnet high school before coming to Duke. She is a current sophomore studying public policy. When I asked her why she participated in civic engagement, she replied:

**Leah:** I almost think it’s a democratic responsibility and on top of that you build your morals.

**Frances:** How do you define moral responsibility?

**Leah:** I guess, that you’ve been given your livelihood because you live in this privileged area, so you should give back as what was given.

Leah fulfilled her democratic responsibility by participated in a Spring Break trip organized by Pathways, a Duke organization associated with the Duke Chapel which organizes missionary trips. Leah traveled to Belize for a week with the program, where she volunteered with several different projects.

**Leah:** On Monday, it was a national holiday, so we just did painting and stuff at the school, and on the other days we did stuff with the kids. So on Tuesday and Wednesday, we worked with the kids at the library, and so they would come in and check out books, and it was a big deal because no one in Belize has a library. So it was really cool to see. And then on Thursday, I was like a classroom helper. And on Friday, I was a tutor.

The weeklong trip to Belize was eye opening experience for Leah. Over the course of the trip, Leah befriended one of the girls who sold jewelry on the beach and was very moved by her story of growing up in a broken home, and coping with living in poverty. Through our discussions, it was difficult for Leah to understand how her involvement in Belize might have had a negative effect. She tended to focus on the positive, and the contributions that they made as a group. Leah felt as though the trip provided her with perspective on her life back in Durham, and expanded her understanding of the way other people live.
Profile #2 – Jessica

Jessica is a current junior from Tibet. She was first introduced to global health and civic engagement when she was a recipient of a civic engagement project. Jessica attended a school run by foreign volunteers who worked with minority groups in China, where she learned English. Jessica explained how she adored the volunteers who ran the program, and considered everything they did to be right.

Jessica: And I mean obviously it was outsider foreigners coming to this rural place and setting up this program to help the students\textsuperscript{13}. The students from the program are all minority students from China. There are 56 ethnicities in China, and only one majority which is 95 percent of the population. And the rest of the 55 ethnicities make the other five percent of the population. And I belong to one of those 55 ethnicities.

Before 2002, I had no exposure to English or anything outside of China, because my school was bilingual - bilingual meaning my own language plus Mandarin Chinese. I was really fortunate enough to go to that program. My classmates and I felt really lucky because we got the chance to learn another language. And I don't know, somehow I just thought, "Wow, this idea of helping people this way..." Because after three or four years - none of the graduates from that program is a failure. After graduating from that program, so many people went overseas to study, and some people got really decent jobs and stuff, whereas some friends that - you know, the old friends we had back home, would sometimes have to face unemployment and stuff. But the graduates from our program did not have to worry about it because we knew English. We had that. So, we felt really lucky, and somehow I felt that idea was really amazing, helping people through education.

At that time, I admired all my teachers. I thought everything, every sentence that my teachers said, everything they did, everything was just amazing. To me, I couldn't find any negative side of anything from them. And so that's how I... And my teachers were like "Oh, yeah, you know, you're good enough to apply for school in the U.S. if you wanted to," and stuff. So I got really excited. And I worked hard too.

Through my teachers, I also met some other people who were doing similar projects in China. I heard about this woman doing global health projects in a Tibetan area in China, and I thought that was amazing. I wanted to be like her. So I came here, and there's a global health program, and I want to be like her. So I started taking classes and stuff.

\textsuperscript{13} Said with a negative connotation.
At the time of the interview, Jessica was taking Professor Kate Whetten’s course in Global Health Ethics which challenges students to complicate the notion that all civic engagement and humanitarian work has inherently positive impacts. She expressed discomfort with the effect the university students were having on the community.

**Jessica:** So then, especially this semester has been so difficult for me because - like this class, the, the discussions we’ve had in the global health ethics class about ethics somehow made me doubt the things that happened, the people and the things that I admired, before, completely. I just like - I, oh my God, kind of worshipped them, you know?

I was like, "What you're doing is so right," and you know, that's what I felt, "and I've always wanted to be like you guys." But now I...it's not like I'm completely discrediting anyone, but I feel like I have more doubts and more questions.

This self realization that she had been idolizing the work of her teachers in Tibet highlighted the ambivalence of the situation and provider her with an additional lens to analyze and interpret her DukeEngage civic engagement project teaching English to refugees in Cairo, Egypt.

**Profile #3 – Erica**

Erica is a current sophomore from South Korea. She first began participating in civic engagement projects because it was a high school requirement. She dabbled in several different forms of volunteering, working at a nursing home, building houses, and tutoring in South Korea. As she continued to participate, she began to develop an appreciation for service, and the notion of civic engagement became more important to her. She spent more and more time working at the nursing home, and felt compelled to continue coming back as she place more value on those human interactions. She volunteered with Habitat for Humanity, and became interested in getting to know “the locals” instead of just building a house.
Erica: And, I think I always looked at it as some trip that was always took and did these things and I never really thought about it. But then, I think my senior year [in high school] I actually really enjoyed doing it. But again, I don't think it was until like the last semester that I really considered it as like, oh, civic engagement, or I even considered it was my thing although I was doing all of it because I enjoyed it.

When Erica came to Duke, she knew civic engagement was important to her, and looked for ways to get involved. She participated in a DukeEngage project in China to help translate documents, but also visited a migrant school, which seemed to have more impact on her.

I almost just accidentally went with a friend to the migrant workers' school that's for unregistered children in China. And, it was so incredible. I guess this is where I felt like this was somewhere that I could change the world, because these people are ignored. They're not even registered. People don't even know they exist. But then, I'm providing some tool for them to use to get out of their particular situation. I think I've always grown up in the developed world and I never really thought that my service was doing anybody a favor. And, I thought I was doing more for myself.

But then, when I saw people in this kind of solid environment, I think it just impacted me more and I realized how much I was privileged and what I can do to make other people's lives better. And, I think that's when I really started to see service as something that I do in order for me to change the world like a person at a time.

And then, I went back to my country, Korea, which is not a third world country. So, it was really different for me to kind of compare from like the terrible conditions of China and the people who aren't well off in Korea are still doing much better than the people I worked with in China. They have clean clothes. They have clean water. So, it was a huge change.

I will address this interview excerpt more fully in Chapter 2, when I discuss the conceptualizations and interactions between high income and low and middle income countries. Erica felt as though she could really make a difference in China, because the people were that much poorer, and living in “desperate” conditions that warranted her attention.
Profile #4 – Michelle

Michelle is a current senior who grew up in a less wealthy family from Washington State. She draws on her experience with poverty to provide perspective for civic engagement projects. I asked Michelle to outline how she became involved in civic engagement, and how she developed her philosophy towards civic engagement. Much of Michelle’s understanding of civic engagement and perspective on creating change originated from her experience growing up in a less affluent family and through her relationship with her mother.

Michelle:  I've tried to give [my mom] advice as to things she should do, like right now she's unemployed and she dates abusive men off and on. And I've tried to give her advice with respect to both as far as getting a job or getting away from the men.

Of course, it's all bound up in a mess because she can't really get much more than a minimum wage job, and the assistance that they give you isn't that much more. So it's like, "Why the hell are you going to get a job? You're not going to get very much more anyway."

And then whether or not she works, it's still highly advantageous for her to date a man, even if he treats her badly, if he gives her money because it supplements the income and it makes it possible for her to take her kids out to the movies, or take her kids out to dinner.

And I think in the process of trying to give her advice I've really learned that all you could do is tell people what's available if they don't know, help them think through different solutions and the pros and cons to each one, because ultimately they're going to make a decision. And a lot of times you don't really know.

And I think really realizing my inability to see how intense that is, and that situation made me realize in providing and volunteering in organizations that serve disadvantaged populations, that you really don't know and you really don't have the capacity to know even if you do have some relationship to it as in your family or whatever.

As she describes, Michelle felt frustrated with her inability to influence her mother’s decisions. But she was able to understand the larger influences and rationalities encompassing her mother’s actions, and that comprehension provides her with the lens to
form realistic expectations about the impact of her work. Michelle is able to see the complexities of her mother’s decision to stay in an abusive relationship: how the incentive of the two-bedroom house, the ability to afford gifts for the children, limited economic prospects, and the impracticality of returning to school made staying in an abusive relationship more of a viable option.

Paul Farmer, a cultural anthropologist and physician, and prominent figure in global health describes this as “structural violence,” where “neither culture nor pure individual will is at fault [for a sickness]; rather, historically given (and often economically drive) processes and forces conspire to constrain individual agency” (Farmer, 79). In this case, her housing security, children, and limited economic and education opportunities serve as structural violence making it harder for her to leave her current situation, and less likely to be familiar with the services available.

Although Michelle was unable to change her mother’s situation, she is more likely to understand an individual’s situation because she knows, first hand, what is like to live in a less fortunate background. This awareness influences not only how she conceptualizes the community involved in a civic engagement project, but also influences what she expects to accomplish through a civic engagement project. Michelle works at the Durham Crisis Response Center, where she answers calls on a crisis line, which typically provide assistance to people who have been sexually assaulted or are in domestic violence situations. She approaches the situation from an objective perspective, and perceives her role as not to save these women, rather to provide them with the resources should they decide if they want to leave their current situation and how to do so if they decide to.
In addition to working with the Durham Crisis Response Center, Michelle participated in a DukeEngage in Durham project where she built a website for a local organization, and is involved with Alternative Spring Break, which takes students up to New York for a week long service trip to work in a soup kitchen.

**Why are individual backgrounds important?**

It is important to consider the civic engagers’ backgrounds because they shape how the civic engagers conceptualize civic engagement, what they might want to accomplish through their project, and how this experience fits in with their larger identity construct. Just as an individual’s background influences how they perceive civic engagement, the external factors influencing one’s life also molds an individual’s background. And that individual point of view determines what one is able to see. The individuals who come from a disadvantaged perspective often must understand both what how they view themselves, and how others view them. W.E.B Dubois describes this heightened self-awareness as a double consciousness, and uses it to explain the situation of blacks in America. Because they are positioned in an inferior status, they are aware both of how see themselves and how they are seen by others.

“This double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” (Dubois, 2)

While W.E.B Dubois uses double consciousness to describe race, the same theory can be applied in the context of class as well. Michelle was raised in a lower income environment, so she may be better able to relate to people of a similar economic status. But Michelle’s knowledge of the power structure and double consciousness of how her
physical presence as a Duke student might be perceived could also be paralyzing, preventing her from “engaging” in the project and learning from the experience.

Jessica experienced the intervention side of civic engagement and led a group of American university students through a Tibetan village, so she might be better able to understand how the community could be affected by civic engagement projects. But Jessica might also glamorize the role of civic engagers in the field because of her relationship with the volunteers who ran her school.

Civic engagement was a requirement for Erica, something she had to do in order to be accepted to a prestigious university, so her varied international experiences provide her with perspective and the ability to adapt to new situations. But at the same time, her experience might make her more likely to see civic engagement as a stepping stone to getting a job.

Leah’s mid-upper class might provide her with more opportunities to travel and conduct civic engagement projects and her religious upbringing might make it easier for her to connect to community members on a spiritual level. But she might be less able to see how her actions in the field could have negative effects.

While it is important to consider individual’s backgrounds, it is equally important to recognize that it is not all dependent on background – individuals can learn from experiences in the field.

**Why civic engagement? What’s the draw?**

So we now have a sampling of students who participate in a variety of civic engagement projects at Duke. But what about the others? Why do they participate in civic engagement? So I asked my interviewees what they thought were the main reasons that Duke students participated in civic engagement projects, and once again, the variety
of answers surprised me. Instead of picking one sole rationale for participation, each interviewee mentioned several reasons Duke students participate in civic engagement. In order to help tease out trends, I broke down their responses into categories, and incorporated a short “tongue in check” tag line that, in theory, could help DukeEngage market itself to someone appealing to that mindset.

The interviewees said Duke students conceptualize civic engagement as a…

**Resume builder or career move.** – *Stay up with the competition!*

A common theme was the idea of using civic engagement as a resume builder, completed to stay competitive in the job market, add a line on a resume, and learn practical experience. When I asked Erica about her perspective, the resume builder was the first draw that came to mind. She acknowledges that there is something about the project that is particular to Duke, that some people at Duke take advantage of the funding. This suggests that civic engagement projects are desirable experiences in the job market.

*Erica:* At Duke, I think [civic engagement] is something you do to boost your resume or a trip that you can take that you can get money out of somewhere. So, I wouldn't say that about like nationwide. I wouldn't even say that about the entire Duke.

*Michelle:* I think a lot of people want something for their resume. I don't think there's necessarily something wrong with that because I'd be deceiving myself if I said that wasn't something that came to mind when I was choosing what activities to do. I definitely think about how this going to fit in the overall picture of my resume and how I'm going to package myself to get a job. I definitely think that's a big motivating factor. Towards the end of my sophomore year [at Duke], I realized that people were applying to internships and everything. I started realizing I needed

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14 These motives were echoed by all of my interviewees, however I focused on the Michelle, Erica, Jessica, and Leah’s wording to support these points.
stuff to put on a resume. I needed to figure out what I was going to do for my next step.

Jessica: Some people just want a line on their resume saying that I helped like 1500 people somewhere, through teaching them "A, B, C, D" or something like that.

Resume building was also the first reason that Michelle mentioned, which surprised me considering her strong background in volunteering and service work. I expected her to say something along the lines of the intrinsic value of the work, especially considering how significantly her experiences affected her personal development. (One potential explanation was that I asked this question in reference to other people as opposed to why the interviewee participated.) Considering civic engagement as a lucrative career move could be indicative of the larger emphasis of Duke. The student body is competitive by nature – it is almost a prerequisite for admission. In order to be in the top echelon of university applicants accepted in the program, you had to take advantage of the opportunities and know how to position yourself. Although there might be a significant population of Duke students who are competitive, Erica acknowledges that not all civic engagers use civic engagement as a resume builder.

Vacation. – Feel like you’re paying too much for tuition? Make the most of it and enjoy an all-expense paid vacation on Duke’s dime!

Some students might want to use this as a paid vacation of sorts – stay at a nice hotel in a different location, and spend a summer having fun. Many of the interviewees who conducted group projects mentioned how pleasant their accommodations were, and how they enjoyed eating at nice restaurants.
**Erica:** I think there’s definitely a segment of Duke that definitely takes civic engagement as like a nicer vacation, like really nice.

One student in Kate Whetten’s Global Health Ethics course even called DukeEngage, DukeIndulge, to describe how some Duke students view the funding agency.


Whether or not it is a naïve perspective, the desire to do good, help others, and make a difference is a strong narrative and clear influence in the decision to participate in civic engagement.

**Erica:** But, I also think that some people do take it seriously and actually want to help out and want to get into that field later. It’s like internship experience for them. They want to see how people are helped and get experience. Sometimes it’s like an alternative spring break or summer that makes you feel good about going somewhere.

*But generally, I feel like at Duke there’s so many people who just need to do everything because that’s what they do.*

*I think to some degree Duke kids are, I don’t want to say naïve, but are the young spirit thinking that we’re going to change the world. As college students we feel like we can do anything. And, I think civic engagement to some degree is where we express that.*

Erica highlights how students want to help, but she colors this positive attitude with the reality that change is a slow process, stating that the students are naïve to have such high expectation.

**Fallback.** – *Nothing else to do? DukeEngage!*

Erica says that civic engagement is becoming the accepted behavior – a fallback option to fill a summer. This is especially disturbing because this approach prevents students from understanding the importance of the work that they are conducting.
**Erica:** Well, I think Duke provides a lot of opportunities for us to do civic engagement with a lot of aid. That's just a given. So like for example, DukeEngage. It's a great opportunity if it was something you needed to seek out and apply to. But to us, DukeEngage is something that you need to do before you graduate. And, I feel like that changes the whole mentality like, “Oh, I don’t have anything to do this summer. Oh, let's do DukeEngage.” I think a lot of times like freshmen in summer are doing it because they think “I’m not qualified enough to go do internships so maybe I'll just do DukeEngage.”

Way to meet people. – *Pop that Duke bubble and meet some REAL people!*

Michelle mentioned the need for people to escape the Duke bubble and traverse the invisible barrier separating the university from the outside world.

**Michelle:** I figured I probably needed to get involved, because I really didn't like Duke, and I think I feel like I needed to get involved because that would have given me something to do at Duke, something that I may enjoy, help me meet some people. I also think I stuck with volunteer opportunities and really sought out different activities that let me do things in Durham, or interact with people who were not from Durham, because it was a great relief being able to get outside the Duke bubble and away from Duke students for once.

Leah also expressed that she was eager to participate in her Pathways trip to become better friends with the individuals in her church group. After traveling with someone, you can know them quite well.

Way to be cool and collect experiences. – *DukeEngage: All the cool kids are doing it!*

Often, students at Duke want to accumulate experiences with the mentality that the more they do, the better prepared they will be, the more they will learn about themselves. Leah explains how this collection of experiences can have selfish and selfless intentions.

**Leah:** What a lot of things students are doing now is collecting experiences. And for me, I know that has a negative tinge to it, but for me,
I just love to go out and just do as many things as I can. So when I saw this opportunity, I totally wanted to do it. And it was so much fun, I’m so glad I did it. So I think the general perception is that civic engagement is a really cool thing to do, and you’re helping someone else out at the same time, so why not. Even just learning experiences. I’m going on some other trips with Duke that are not civic engagement, which are like cool opportunities. But if civic engagement is involved, it’s an extra plus. And then, I think, people feel obligated to do civic engagement just because there’s a culture of achievements, and civic engagement is one of those things you want to have as part of your achievements. I don’t think that’s necessarily motivationally ethical.

**Frances**: Why not?

**Leah**: Because you should want to do something for its intrinsic value.

**Frances**: But if you’re going on a Pathways trip, [a Christian student group at Duke,] to get to know people better in your Pathways group, isn’t that also not doing it for the intrinsic value of civic engagement?

**Leah**: Definitely.

**Frances**: So do you think there’s something unethical with...

**Leah**: No, because you wouldn’t want to go to Belize because you want to meet new people. You go to Belize for a variety of reasons that you can’t even quantify?

**Frances**: Like what? I’m going to make you quantify them.

**Leah**: The civic engagement aspect, and then within that, there’s so much more. Part of civic engagement is for yourself, so there are selfish reasons, and selfless reasons. And maybe they ask you if you have a special talent. So maybe if you are good at music, you want to go there and share your musical talents. Or, maybe you want to grow closer to God, so that would be something else, or maybe you want to meet people, or maybe you want a travel experience or maybe you don’t want to go home for spring break, and you want to go somewhere else. I think the overall motivation for the people on my trip was to go on a Christian mission with like-minded people. A lot of people hadn’t been out of the country before.

**Frances**: What’s the difference between going on a trip to Belize because you want to have a trip to Belize on your resume (for self) as opposed to going to Belize because you want to go on a Christian mission (for self). So how come it’s worse for someone to want to go to Belize to pad their resume as opposed to someone to go to Belize to grow closer to God?
Leah: Because if you’re doing it for spiritual reasons, those reasons can spill over into 31 selfless reasons. So, it’s twofold, whereas putting it on your resume is strictly for your personal benefit.

Although I broke down the motives into different categories, it is important to remember that the decision to participate in a civic engagement project is not necessarily a result of one sole factor. A student can participate in a civic engagement project because she wants to build her resume, travel abroad, meet new people, develop your faith, change your perspective, make a difference, help people, gain practical career experience, make the most out of the $50K yearly tuition, escape the Duke bubble, AND have an all-expense paid vacation. It is not an either/or situation. In addition, the effect of one’s motives can change when they are in the field.

**Duke Civic Engagement in a Global Context**

Although this huge outflow of students of summer is a relatively new endeavor at Duke, the movement is indicative of a larger context, a recognizable set of discourses sharing a certain set of assumptions. As Leah mentioned above, the ‘civic engagement’ label is an “extra plus” and adorns projects with an extra level of prestige compared to volunteering, service, or political activism. However, creating a new term also bypasses the discourses and critiques surrounding the other forms of community involvement. Not everyone agrees that service is the appropriate way to engage in the community. Some people may consider volunteering as inferior and ineffective to create sustainable change. And some, like Ivan Illich, argue that there is not an appropriate method of engaging with low income countries. By the lack of an established definition of civic engagement, the

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15 I realize that there is a great deal of variety and heterogeneity within humanitarian aid and missionary groups. Here, I will generalize based on my informed experience and the sources that I have collected throughout writing this thesis.
institutions of such programs create an environment where students can avoid asking exactly what it is they are actually doing in the field.

The label also distinguishes civic engagement projects from the discourses surrounding humanitarian aid organizations, corporations and churches – three groups that are active in international development. The debate on the ethics and impact of humanitarian aid, and mission work, for example, have long broached the borders between the high income and low income countries, and provide a comparable example for critique.

Although there is a great deal of variety and heterogeneity within humanitarian aid missions, missionary trips with church groups, their defined structure and anticipated motives serve as a guide for the projects. Often, the actions of humanitarian aid organizations are guided by protocols, an established set of principles to direct their actions in the field. Many humanitarian aid organizations provide medical assistance to populations affected by natural disaster or political turmoil, and abide by the Hippocratic Oath to “do no harm” (Definition of Hippocratic Oath) and there are discussions of establishing an institution to hold organizations accountable for their actions (discussed further in Chapter 4). Corporations expect to contribute through particular interactions, such as a lawyer volunteering services pro bono, or donating a percentage of company revenue to a designated organization. Missionaries and evangelical groups refer back to the Bible as a guide for how they should act, treat others, and what they should accomplish through their trips.

The defined perceptions of humanitarian aid, corporations, and church groups provide a framework for their projects, and the clearly defined criteria, expectations, and goals, provide a rubric to judge projects. Because of this defined (or perceived)
assumption about these groups, it is easier to establish a critique of their practices. The nebulous definition civic engagement makes it more difficult to establish a critique about the program in general. As a newer label for interaction between high and low income countries, it is possible that civic engagement has yet to develop the critique that affects the more historical and established forms of engagement. Since civic engagement is marketed as an entity independent from all volunteering, service, and other established groups and does not have an established set of expectations for a successful projects, it often is not included in the critiques of the other systems placing people in the field. So that is what I am doing here. Civic engagement does not happen in a bubble and it is important to put it in conversation with the other types of projects that are involved in the developing world16.

Humanitarian Aid and Civic Engagement

Michael Barnett, Professor of International Affairs at the Humphrey Institute and at the University of Minnesota says that humanitarianism is most commonly associated with “provision of relief to victims of human-made and natural disasters,” by providing basic services such as food, water, and shelter, and some “ambitious” humanitarians have expanded the definition to address more structural infractions including, “development, democracy promotion, establishing a rule of law and respect for human rights, and post-conflict peace building” (Barnett, 3). The humanitarian aid is based off of a set of core principles, the most significant of which are as follows:

16 It is important to remember, however, that although humanitarian aid, missionary work, and corporate social responsibility share similarities with civic engagement, they each operate in a slightly different “field.” While the humanitarian aid organizations are run by trained professionals, the civic engagement projects are conducted by students who often lack much experience or background in the field.
“Humanity commands attention to all people. Impartiality requires that assistance be based on need and not on the basis of nationality, race, religion, gender, or political opinion. Neutrality demands that humanitarian organizations refrain from taking part in hostilities or from any action that either benefits or disadvantages the parties to the conflict. Independence demands that assistance should not be connected to any of the parties directly involved in armed conflicts or who have a stake in the outcome; accordingly there is a general rule that agencies should either refuse or limit their reliance on government funding, especially if the donors have a stake in the outcome.” (Barnett, 3)

Some humanitarian aid organizations use these principles in order to ensure that their work is improving the condition of the aid recipients, and to prevent themselves from becoming a target in the field.

Like humanitarian aid, my interviewees highlighted the desire to create change through their civic engagement projects. Both civic engagement and humanitarian aid target poor, disadvantaged populations who are considered in need of help. Unlike civic engagement, there is not an explicit emphasis that humanitarian aid workers go to work abroad because they want to learn more about themselves, however humanitarian aid projects might appeal to the attraction to more exotic areas that draw civic engagers (as I discuss in the following chapter.)

One critique of humanitarian aid is that organizations often refrain from being politically active (in an attempt to reduce the possibility they would be seen as a target), and instead treat the symptoms of a larger problem that result from an unaddressed root causes of the problem. However, if humanitarian aid organizations decided to use their funding to influence the political decision makers to address the root causes of the problem instead of investing money in food supplements, people would starve. Generally, civic engagement projects only address the symptoms of the structural problems, providing a topical fix. For example, when Jessica and Erica taught English to displaced minority children in Egypt and China, respectively, they both wondered if their
work was really effective since the minority children would continue to be ostracized because of the larger social and political factors defining their relationship. Does this mean that civic engagement projects will be generally ineffective in creating the change the students so desire? (And more importantly, how do the civic engagers they so desire is even appropriate for the community?)

Another criticism of humanitarian aid is that there is the risk that the funding and resources will not reach the intended population and have the potential to further empower a conflict. In the field it is difficult to attain complete, accurate information quickly, and so decisions are made with the information available. This has proven to be a problem in North Korea, where the government requested the right to distribute all humanitarian aid, and was preventing it from reaching the intended populations, and also in Rwanda, where refugee camps served as organizing bases for the rebel groups. Are the resources being drained into civic engagement projects worth it? Is there any benefit to the recipients of the projects? Does there need to be?

Although humanitarian aid organizations are often highly critical of the motives of corporate investment, they themselves are not exempt from appealing to the visual side of the distribution of aid. Bernard Kouchner was the co-founder of Medicins Sans Fronteires (MSF, also known as Doctors without Borders,) dealt with conflicting motives for involving in humanitarian aid. “Kouchner, as a doctor, wanted to alleviate suffering, but, as a politician, he also wanted his actions to be exemplary. His motto was “Concept and action, here and there” (Traub, 6). In 1992, MSF tried to raise awareness of the mass starvation occurring in Somalia by distributing 15,000 tons of rice. However, when the rice arrived, Kouchner acted out of character for a humanitarian aid worker and, “obliged the news photographers by carrying a sack of rice up the beach – once, twice, three times,
until the shot was just right. The press treated the incident as indecent showboating; the sac de riz became Kouchner’s albatross” (Traub, 6). As Traub states, “it’s hard to see the difference between Kouchner at his worst and at his best” (Traub, 6). Even though he was not acting in the best interest of the aid recipients, the primary principle of humanitarian aid, the photo brought attention to the violence in Somalia. When confronted about the issue, Koucher defended his actions as better than nothing: “‘Where were you when we were bringing rice to Somalia?’ Ripert asks of his critics. ‘What were you doing? Nothing? Then shut up’” (Traub, 6). Koucher’s actions demonstrate the similarities that humanitarian aid can share with corporate social responsibility, or improving the image of the organization or charitable action, and highlights how interrelated these different forms of involvement in the developing world.

Missionary Groups and Civic Engagement

The Bible establishes the idea that Christianity is the only way to heaven, and calls Christians to spread the word of God to those who do not share the same faith. This mentality encourages members of the congregation to engage in missionary trips with the intent to convert the locals to Christianity. The Christian organizations running the trips, such as “Mission Trips to Africa” organize all the details, and, “All you are required to do is raise the necessary funds at the given times, attend orientation meetings, and prepare yourself mentally, physically and spiritually for your fun trip” (“Mission Trips to Africa: Mission Statement”). This sentiment is reflected in the mission statements of several organizations that organize mission trips:

- “Mission trips to Africa is a program of Africa Mission Alliance whose mission is to walk in the love of God by providing opportunities to the poor, equipping African leaders to develop self-sustainable communities, and sharing the good news of the kingdom of God.” (“Mission Trips to Africa: Who We Are”)
Missionary trips have been criticized for how they consider the recipients of their services as powerless and, in essence, doomed, and for imposing their beliefs on individuals who might not necessarily care to change their religious beliefs. They assume that the Christian religion is superior, and the only way to have salvation in the afterlife. When I asked Gail Nystrom, the head of the CRHF, what she thought of missionary groups, she stated definite differences between the church groups and the secular non-governmental organization:

“We don’t have an attitude of pity, because we don’t preach about spiritual practice, we let people choose their own and let people talk about it together, because we have been there for a very long time, and our goal is not to have them converted. Our goal is to have them housed, fed, clothed, educated, healthy, and working. And the church groups, their goal is to have them saved for Jesus.”

Gail considers the work of the CRHF to be humanitarian, providing the basic necessities for the individuals in La Carpio: food, clothing, education, medical services, and employment, and the work of the missionaries to be single minded, with the goal of conversion instead of improvement.

However, although Gail might not consider the missionary work as effective in the community, the individuals who particulate on the trip often consider their role as philanthropic, as a way to save the souls of the non-Christians. The Bible establishes that as their mission, and consequently, the attempted conversion is a sufficient attempt to solve the problems. However, despite Gail’s adamant comment that the proselytizing is
unique to missionary work, there is an aspect of conversion present in civic engagement. Whereas missionary groups work to change the beliefs of individuals and encourage them to adopt their own religion, many civic engagers attempt to change the individuals on the project sites and convert their existing practices to the cultural and political norms familiar to the civic engagers.

Corporate Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement

Corporate social responsibility takes the form of donations in the form of goods or monetary donations. One criticism of corporate social responsibility is that the companies make donations in order to improve their company’s image and potentially to distract attention away from other faults. The distribution of corporate monetary donations or provisions is often heavily publicized and documented by the media. Immediately after Hurricane Katrina, Walmart donated, “$20 million in cash, one hundred truckloads of free goods, and food for one hundred thousand people” and was “held up as a model” for socially responsible corporations (Barnett 117). In light of their huge donation, Walmart received increased media attention, and chief executive H. Lee Scott took full advantage to say: “We have always demanded that we as a company care. If anything, this week has shown we do care” (Barnett 117).

Like Walmart’s Katrina investment, DukeEngage has been a selling point for Duke University, and oddly enough, was introduced shortly after several players of the Duke lacrosse team were accused of taking advantage of a woman at a team party. Although not necessarily a causational relationship, DukeEngage helped shift the negative media attention targeting Duke to a more favorable outlet. Civic engagement has become part of the Duke brand, a term associated with the university. Duke is both a
university, and a corporate brand, interested in maintaining and improving its public image.

**Interactions in the Field**

Even though humanitarian aid organizations, corporations, missionary groups, and civic engagement projects market themselves as unique, in practice, the divisions are much more ambiguous. Individuals themselves could work with multiple different organizations – they could begin working on a civic engagement project, and then cross over to working with a humanitarian organization. Someone could go on a missionary trip and also do pro bono work at a law firm. Sometimes the projects are considered in two different categories. Leah went on a missionary trip through Pathways, but she also considers it a civic engagement project.

The different institutions often interact within the same space. For example, one day I was working in the education program at the CRHF community center in La Carpio. Gail was talking with a potential donor who was considering making a large donation to fund a new clinic. As a long term volunteer, I helped the women at the community center teach a lesson plan, when a group of 12 to 15 white high school aged kids with a missionary group walked down the road in front of La Libertad, calling for the kids to come out and play. They were blowing bubbles and waving balloons.

Faced with the decision between sitting down inside or playing with the white older volunteers with toys, there was little hesitation. Before we knew it, all thirty-some kids were up out of the circle and had run out into the street. Class was over. The teachers stayed on the patio of the school, watching the kids, and I went outside to see what was going on.
The high school students gave the girls bubbles and made the boys balloon swords. The boys, especially, were thrilled. Although the kids were having a great time, I could sense there were negative implications. Unlike the wealthier neighborhoods where the majority of the volunteers (including myself) were from, domestic abuse, the play sword fighting took on a different connotation in the context of La Carpio. Unfortunately, in La Carpio, domestic violence and gang related incidents are an everyday reality, and one of the goals of the CRHF is to create a space where the children of La Carpio get off the streets and are exposed to more constructive role models in a loving environment. The play fighting was completely counter the message and values the teachers and I were trying to instill at the CRHF community center.

I approached the man who appeared to be in charge of the evangelist group. He asked me which church the CRHF was affiliated with, and I responded that the CRHF worked independently from religious institutions because of its status as a humanitarian foundation. I explained that the focus of the CRHF was to extend health and education services to the community. He continued to say that the work we were doing was useless unless we encouraged a relationship with Jesus Christ.

This example shows that in one particular instance, there was a potential investor, civic engager (me), and a missionary group all interacting in the same space, demonstrates both the interrelatedness and divisions of the different groups. On the ground, it can seem like a soup of volunteers, instead of individuals with specific motives projects. Although civic engagement might be marketed as a new form of involvement between the high income and low income countries, it shares similarities with service and volunteering, as well as with humanitarian, corporate investment, and missionary work who are acting in the field. All of the individuals bring a unique point of view based on
their experiences and have different expectations for what they want to accomplish by working in the field. Everyone is acting and interacting in the same space, which causes a change in perceptions. These connections are important to acknowledge as it demonstrates how civic engagement does not occur independently from the power dynamic surrounding the involvement of the developed world in the affairs of the developing world.
Chapter 2 – Motives to “Help” – Power between the “Developed” and “Developing”

This chapter explores the tension among the varying conceptions of low and middle income countries: the glamorization and romanticism of poverty, and the desire to fix all of its problems. I draw attention to two discourses, exotic fascination and the White Man’s Burden, to demonstrate how institutionalized conceptions of the low and middle income countries, often referred to as the “developing world,” as those in the “developed world have reached the panicle and those in the “developing world” have to get to the same place, reinforce and reproduce unequal power relationships. These contribute to the recreation of a dichotomous relationship that creates a self constituted other, which characterizes high and low and middle income countries and allows for little acknowledgement that there are things to be learned from people in low and middle income countries that might be important.

A week into our summer in Costa Rica, Dana and I had visited most of the CRHF’s project sites in La Carpio, and were attempting to finalize the project which would serve as our focus for the remaining seven weeks. I experienced a strong reaction to the poverty when Gail drove us down to the river in lower La Carpio, I wrote the following journal entry describing my first introduction to the river, the area of La Carpio where I ended up worked for two summers.

We had spent all week working in the community center for La Carpio, the predominantly Nicaraguan slum on the outskirts of San Jose, Costa Rica and volunteering at the San Gabriel clinic for terminally ill children. We had leveled dirt for a community garden and visited prisons. I was on information overload. But Gail told us she would not sit down with us to finalize our research question until we had been down to El Rio, the poorest part of La Carpio. She wanted to go check up on Flor, a

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17 I will refer to “developing” countries as “low and middle income countries,” and “developed” countries as “high income countries” because it is a less politically charged terms.
single mother of four, who was severely depressed and suicidal, and wanted us to tag along.

We drove into La Carpio, passed the CRHF community center and kept on going. The fairly established buildings became more rickety, concrete structures gave way to tin walls. The paved roads turned to bumpy pathways, laden with pot holes that threatened to stall the van. We parked and got out, and were immediately hit by the retching stench, a cocktail of human excretion, rotten fruit, and meat spoiled by the sun. I gagged. But Gail kept talking, unfazed, about how potential donors could not see how hard life really was down here. I couldn’t relate. How could they not?

We followed a trail of putrid water down a little ravine, closer to the river and saw a slew of shanties in even worse condition than before. Not only extremely unstable, a hodge podge of tin scraps with no real floor, but they were situated precariously right on the banks of the river that doubles as a community sewage system. There is no potable water, and they rely on boiling water while making rice to kill most of the bacteria. Gail explained that the banks of the river are eroding rapidly, so they live in constant threat of mudslides carrying a home into the river, or bringing down a tree from up above and destroying everything. And the big rains haven’t even come yet.

It was there we ran into Flor’s four children. They were walking up the street, side by side, hand in hand. One of the little boys didn’t have shoes on (and refused to be carried). The oldest girl who couldn’t have been more than ten led him around the broken glass littering the pathways. My heart just melted. Their strong family ties an expression of hope amidst such a stressful environment.

I caught her glance and it held.

Eyes paint a picture, tell a story. A window into a person’s soul. They can show a wink of endearment, a flash of jealousy, a sparkle of amusement. But these eyes showed maturity beyond anything I had seen. But not from age, out of necessity. They were the eyes who had seen her mother depressed, who had cooked food, who worried about the family’s wellbeing and future.

Nine years old is way too young to take on adult responsibilities or to deal with a severely depressed mother. I know I wouldn’t be able to handle that kind of stress, and I am over twice her age. But this tin box was their house, these glass-ridden pathways their streets. La Carpio, their reality. An unavoidable reality that the girl has to confront on a day to day basis.

I thought I knew a thing or two about what to expect. And after spending a week going all over the country, I thought I had seen it all. But no research I could have done could have prepared me for that girl’s glance. And not like I would want it to.

Rereading it now, I am a bit embarrassed. I am not sure whether it was because I was naïve or inflicted with literary prose, but I am disturbed by my attraction to helping
the exotic poor. Not only did I want to work in a slum, but I wanted to work in the poorest part of the slum. I was attracted to the sense of emergency and challenge of the situation. At the same time, I was drawn to the poverty, I also felt disgusted by the sights and smells of La Carpio. I was fascinated by Flor, the suicidal mother with her four helpless children, and at the same time disgusted by their living conditions. I definitely felt for Flora’s eldest daughter, and felt sympathy for what she had to witness and what she would have to endure growing up in La Carpio.

That flood of emotions made working in La Carpio appealing, and made me feel empowered and entitled to make a difference, but also a place that I couldn’t wait to leave at the end of the day. The work was hard, and I sure looked forward to my shower to wash all the grit and grime off of me and escape back into my comfortable space. I was attracted to the poverty of the situation, and simultaneously wanted to fix it. At the same time, if I was not exposed to difference, I would not have any exposure to life in La Carpio, and I would not be set down the track to where I am now, writing this thesis.

It is important to treat the community members with respect for their culture and humanity, but there is a difference between accepting an unjust situation, attributing the difference to cultural relativism and failing to respond out of respect for the culture, and attempting to alter the community’s culture to mimic practices in high income countries and introducing ideas that are not culturally sensitive. By framing the conditions with understanding and appreciation, there is the tendency to accept that conditions are appropriate for those who live there, and thus blinding oneself to the issues affecting the community. But this danger becomes unacceptable when conditions are attributed to culture, when the civic engager is “selectively blinded” to misdiagnose inequality as culture (Farmer, 6). Paul Farmer claims that this misreading is a problem in ethnography:
“Common indeed are the ethnographies in which poverty and inequality, the end result of a long process of impoverishment, are reduced to a form of cultural difference. We were sent to the field to look for different cultures. We saw oppression; it looked, well, different from our comfortable lives in the university; and so we called it ‘culture.’ We came, we saw, we misdiagnosed.” (Farmer 7)

Farmer’s cautionary point is also evident through my reflections on Costa Rica. At the time of writing this journal entry, I had spent one week traveling through Costa Rica on an earlier trip and about a week-long introductory tour of the programs run by the CRHF, so it is extremely bothersome that I thought I had “seen it all.” This assumption is dangerous because it can prevent me from listening and learning from the community. Leah exhibits a similar superficial, romanticized sense of knowing when she describes the Belizean community members as: “They’re just so carefree. They’re just happy you’re there and interested in helping. They don’t really care what you’re going to do, or whatever, it’s just like cool to talk to them and stuff.” When Leah describes the Belizean community as “happy go lucky,” it might be harder for her to see that indeed there exist unethical differences in need of change.

While understanding the lifestyle and appreciating the culture are necessary to treat someone as an equal, a problem arises when poverty becomes sentimentalized, blinding helpers to the needs of the community. The “poor” can become glamorized for living a life where nothing is taken for granted, and there is little excess and waste. For a middle or upper class individual from a “developed” country who works a forty hour work week, and constantly battles sleep deprivation and the stresses of everyday life, having time to slow down enough to “stop and smell the roses” (or stale urine) is extremely appealing. Instead of acknowledging the problems that exist, there is the potential for creating a double standard that glamorizes the “simple” lifestyle of the poor,
while failing to acknowledge that the conditions would not be acceptable in our own lives in the United States.

**Exotic Fascination**

Renato Rosaldo, an anthropologist, explains the concept of exotic fascination through the story of a missionary who converted Ilongots in the Philippines to Christianity and modernized their way of life by providing clothing and education. However, when the missionary described the population, she reminisced about the days when there were “threats on their lives from men she called headhunters, about how people always sang their indigenous songs, and about the absence of store-bought shirts” (Rosaldo, 115). That struck Rosaldo as odd, and out of character for the missionary. Now, “Ilongot baptized believers, as the New Tribes missionaries called them, purposely abandoned their songs, saying they tugged at their hearts and awakened their old ways. The end of headhunting, for the missionary, marked the success of her evangelical efforts. Most of the shirts were donations that she herself had distributed. She had played a major role in producing, and evidently desired, the changes that took place,” and yet she remained nostalgic for a time before her missionary work had an effect (Rosaldo, 115). Rosaldo describes this exotic fascination and “innocent yearning” where people “mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed as imperialist nostalgia, the inherent paradox that occurs when “someone deliberately alters a form of life and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention” (Rosaldo, 108). This imperialist nostalgia accompanies exotic fascination tends the poor and indigenous, the so-called “savages.”

In her chapter on Gringa Positioning, anthropologist Diane Nelson, demonstrates how Rosaldo’s imperialist nostalgia translates to a reverence for the authentic, and the
paternalistic desire to modernize the developing regions. She conducted her fieldwork in Guatemala, a country coping with a bloody past and mentions how uncomfortable it was to recognize that often individuals from high income countries are attracted to “similar imaginings” of the rustic, authentic developing world, “of traditional Indian culture, unpaved roads, dangerous hygiene practices (‘Don’t drink the water!’), war, poverty, and a weak currency that makes it really cheap” (Nelson 55). She stated that these signs of, “third-world backwardness that allow us to deny coevalness and thus gives us the magic frisson of going back in time, the hope of maybe lending a hand as they step over into modernity” (Nelson, 55). Consequently, it becomes harder to see the heterogeneity and fluidarity of communities, as they change and incorporate new traditions and develop new customs, and recognize the change within the anthropologist or civic engager.

In accordance with Rosaldo’s concept of the romantization and fascination of poverty, Erica discusses why she feels as though it is more effective to do civic engagement in needier areas. Similarly to my first experience in La Carpio, Erica was attracted to working in the poorer areas in China because she felt that was where she could have the most overall positive impact. Erica compared the work she conducted at a migrant workers’ school for unregistered children in China, which she considers to be a developing region, and the tutoring project in her home country of South Korea, a developed country. She said working in China was an “incredible” experience where she could “change the world” because the individuals there were neglected by everyone; “people don’t even know they exist.” It is ironic that even though she taught in one school in China, for a short period of time, she equated that to changing the world.

When I asked her why she felt more compelled to work in a poorer country, she said she felt there was a greater potential for a positive impact in more destitute areas,
because whatever she contributed would be that much more significant an improvement from their current living conditions. She rationalized that was not as significant a contribution to provided canned food to the poor in high income countries because they already have food stamps and public services. If she brought canned food to a low income country, however, the donation would have “saved lives” because, “they were literally starving until I brought these.” Just as the missionary referenced by Rosaldo conceived her role as a savior and provider for the Ilongots, Erica conceives herself as someone who can change the lives of the poor, and adopts goals similar to those in humanitarian aid.

In the midst of her analysis on potential impact, Erica mentions a contradiction: her experience doesn’t necessarily support this hypothesis. Despite feeling as though her work should have a greater influence on poorer people, Erica also suggested that she did not see as much impact in low income countries:

**Erica:** *I think people are more inclined to volunteer in developing countries because you can see the results much better in the third world country. Although I didn’t think that I saw any results in China*[^18] *but at least I was thinking like these kids really have nothing and whatever I’m bringing them this is a privilege for them.... But seeing a kid who was abandoned by parents, found in the trash can [...] Whatever you provide for them is literally a plus. I feel like that’s why people would rather go to a third world country where everything you do seems to be making progress in their lives.*

*It was basically government corruption and discrimination. It’s not like we’re going to solve that in four months. And I think we were always kind of bogged down by that particular bigger picture. We’re not going to make that big of a change. I think you get discouraged*

This attraction to the exotic field site location both romanticizes and attempts to fix the poverty. There is a distinct level of attraction to the direr situation. Just as I was repulsed by the sights and smells of the poorer regions of La Carpio, but I was still

[^18]: China is not considered a low income country, but Erica refers to it as such because the area where she taught English to the undocumented migrant children was extremely poor.
attracted to working there because it was the poorest area, Erica is attracted to the
poverty, and believes she will be able to fix their problem and have a greater contribution
working somewhere where children are abandoned by their parents. She has construed a
narrative that defines herself as the savior and the individuals in developing regions as
poor, and in need of her help, even representing the children of the Third World as an
abandoned child.

However, Erica’s commentary highlights the ambivalence surrounding the
effectiveness of civic engagement projects and the romanticization of poverty. Although
she romanticizes the poor, it is also true that any services she could provide for an
abandoned baby could be beneficial. Although Erica does not appear to see the
significant financial, social, and economic inequality in high income countries, she has a
more developed perspective than Leah’s opinions of the Belizeans, and a more complex
understanding than Rosaldo’s missionary.

Despite this heightened level of attraction to the unfamiliarity and exoticness of
developing communities, Erica acknowledges the limitations of working in a field that is
so embedded with structural violence. The very same factors that attracted her to the
project make it difficult to have positive impact. Erica acknowledges that despite her
attraction to the poverty in China and perception that she could “make a bigger
difference,” the actual contribution was limited by the same structural conditions,
government corruption and social stigma in this case, which made the site appealing in
the first place, and an ideal field site. This demonstrates the ambiguity and multiple
truths of involvement in civic engagement.
Desiring to Fix – White Man’s Burden

*Take up the White Man’s burden--*
*Send forth the best ye breed--*
*Go bind your sons to exile*
*To serve your captives’ need;*
*To wait in heavy harness,*
*On fluttered folk and wild--*
*Your new-caught, sullen peoples,*
*Half-devil and half-child.*

*(An excerpt from Richard Kipling’s poem, White Man’s Burden)*

While it is not ideal to romanticize poverty, it may be equally detrimental to problematize poverty. Conceptualizing the poor as problems to be fixed only reinforces the West’s self-declared place on top of the world/ideological hierarchy. By immediately identifying all of the problems with the community, the student puts himself/herself in a precarious position of superiority, feeling an obligation to ‘fix’ all the problems of the poor. Moreover, in the case of civic engagement, it is not just a foreigner, but a student – an 18 to 21 year old with few real skills or cultural knowledge – expecting to fix a problem they don’t know, and couldn’t know, much about. However, the risk is that the civic engagers from high income countries impose their perspective on the community based on his/her perspective of what is ‘right’ without actually listening to the needs and ideas of the community, or they “listen” to the needs and ideas but filter and mold them into their perspective of what is “right.”

The tensions between the romanticization of poverty and the desire to ‘fix it’ have considerable roots in colonial and postcolonial history, and many consider it an extension of the colonialist (racist?) mentality, as demonstrated by the charged language in Kipling’s White Man’s Burden. By describing the “captives” as “half-devil and half-child,” Kipling implies that it is the responsibility of the “developed” countries to serve as a paternal role and care and help and protect their “new-caught” “captives”. In his
book, *Against Empire*, Michael Parenti argues that the notion ‘to help’ is simply an extension of colonialism or neo-imperialism, “the process whereby the dominant politico-economic interests of one national expropriate for their own enrichment the land, labor, raw materials, and markets of another people” (Parenti, 1). This unequal power dynamic between high income and low income countries was produced through a history of colonialism and processes and creation of exploitation, and reinforced through the low income countries’ dependence on money from the high income countries (Parenti, 3). This dependency produces the narrative of, and implicit relationship between, the “helpers” and the “helpless.”

Consequently, as Edward Said explains in Orientalism, high income countries (the “Occident”), has the ability to characterize the low income countries (the “Orient”), “dealing with [the Orient] by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 3). This power differential positions high income countries as the active, masculine actors, and the low income countries as passive, feminine recipients who are acted on.

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There is a certain degree of power that allows the Occident to have authority over the Orient, permitting it to be the definer instead of the defined, the researcher instead of the researched. This is not just material difference, but discursive, and permit the high income countries to define themselves by stating that they are not like the “other,” both
defining and homogenizing the high income and low income countries. Duke graduate, Kathy Choi, expands on Michael Maren’s argument to address how the relationship between the high and low income countries results in “othering,” or where one’s identity is defined by being different from another population:

“In The Road to Hell, Michael Maren points to the ways in which this type of relation [high income countries vs low income countries] perpetuates a distortion of good intentions and actualizes itself as an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ type of relation. In essence, aid in many ways becomes a method of ‘othering’ the powerless in order to assert one’s own power. These powerful inequalities thus become reified as natural and uncontroversial, converting a variety of aid projects into ethically unproblematic interventions even when there is evidence to the contrary.” (Choi, 15)

These power relations combined with “othering” literally and figuratively define who is the “savior” and who is the “saved.” In 2003, French Médecins Sans Frontières was providing humanitarian aid in Iraq. As the political environment became increasingly charged, two MSF employees were held hostage, and MSF’s humanitarian assistance came to a halt as they decided how they should handle the situation. They were faced with a choice: They could either continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the Iraqis who needed provisions and risk the safety of more staff members, or they could pull out of Iraq, halting humanitarian aid, but ensuring the safety of the other MSF staff members. Which lives were more worthy of saving? If they removed the workers, they were, in essence, saying that the risk was acceptable for Iraqis but too dangerous for the humanitarian aid workers subsequently creating a double standard of acceptable harm (Fassin, 2007). MSF ultimately decided it was safer to remove the remaining humanitarian workers from Iraq.

The language used to describe the high income and low income countries often incorporates a series of assumptions that reinforces the justification of the White Man’s
Burden, identifying the non-Western countries as problems to be fixed, and implies that the countries are moving in the “right” direction, blinding Western countries from seeing potential worsening conditions.

“When we say a country is ‘underdeveloped,’ we are implying that it is backward and retarded in some way that its people have shown little capacity to achieve and evolve…‘developing’ seems to be just a euphemistic way of saying ‘underdeveloped but belatedly starting to do something about it.’ It still implies that poverty was an original historic condition and not something imposed by the imperialists. It also falsely suggests that these countries are developing when actually their economic conditions are usually worsening.” (Parenti, 7)

There is an implicit assumption that the label of ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘developing’ means that the countries are below a certain standard, and are working their way towards the Western/developed ideal, problematizing poverty as a condition needing to be fixed. “Development proceeded by creating ‘abnormalities’ (such as the ‘illiterate,’ the ‘underdeveloped,’ the ‘malnourished,’ ‘small farmers,’ or ‘landless peasants’) which it would later treat and reform” (Escobar 41). Parenti describes this sense of obligation of the “developed countries” to help developing countries succeed by adopting Western ideals and principles as a new form of the White Man’s Burden, (a “favorite imperialist fantasy,”) which implores the wealthier countries to educate to modernize the developing countries (7).

However, Arturo Escobar, an anthropologist focusing on international development, notes that the “transformation of the poor into the assisted” changes the treatment of the poor, causing them to be the recipients of aid instead of actors themselves, […] setting in place of new mechanisms of control” as the Third world feels a philanthropic tie to manage the development of the Third World, since there is the supposition that they are unable to do so themselves (Escobar 22). This desire to ‘fix’ the poor countries results in the imposition of Western ideas and the reinforcement of power
relationships. This approach often discounts the local resources, experience, and cultural practices. Parenti argues that developing countries do not need Western ideology, instead they need the resources that were exploited by the Western countries.

“People in [low income] countries do not need to be taught how to farm. They need the land and the implements to farm. They do not need to be taught how to fish. They need the boats and the nets and access to shore frontage, bays, and oceans. They need industrial plants to cease dumping toxic effusions into the waters. They do not need to be convinced that they should use hygienic standards. They do not need a Peace Corps Volunteer to tell them to boil their water, especially when they cannot afford fuel or have no access to firewood. They need the conditions that will allow them to have clean drinking water and clean clothes and homes.” (Parenti, 8)

Development discourses and the notion of “helping” bypass politics and prevents asking the difficult questions about the distribution of resources and historical exploitation. Although Parenti shares Illich’s perspective that individuals from high income countries are becoming too involved in the affairs of low income countries, he does not specify how to create “new conditions” that would allow the low income countries to address their needs.

Performing as a provider for low and middle income countries enables high income countries to reaffirm their own power and spread their political and economic structure. When Erica worked with unregistered Chinese minority children, was learning English from an unqualified student the community’s top priority? How does she know if that service was truly desired and most effective in the community? It seems as though providing one service is a way of saying “I’m doing something,” the justification for not addressing, and perhaps perpetuating and furthering, the roots of the problems. Michelle also considers civic engagement and volunteering a way for the privileged to cope with white guilt and justify their privilege while others are poor. That way, they can feel satisfied they have made some sort of an impact, and, “still go home to their wealthy
houses and interact with their primarily white friends…They could stay in their own
habitués without that being a problem because sometimes they travel to another part of
the world and help in some way or another.”

The power dynamic described by Parenti and Escobar is ingrained in the cultures
of both the high income countries and low and middle income countries which allows and
enables the production of certain narratives. It affects how civic engagers from high
income countries perceive those less wealthy; either as a romanticized notion, a problem
to ‘fix,’ or a combination thereof. I was attracted to the poverty experience by Flora’s
family, but I also desperately wanted to change it. My journal entry was naïve. I was
born and raised in a high income country and I have unknowingly internalized the
assumptions Parenti and Escobar identified. But just as my journal entry was unrefined;
it was also real and human. The power structures will not be changed simply by not
engaging in the process and remaining unaware of the existence of the unequal power
relationships. The important part is learning how to identify the assumptions, and
changing one’s actions to reflect the newfound knowledge.

The Home and the Field: Complexities of Power between the Low and High Income
Countries

This rhetoric differentiating the high income and low income countries translates
into civic engagement by informing what is constituted as the home, and what is
considered the field, or areas that are appropriate sites for civic engagement projects. Just
as Said describes the Orient and the Occident as mutually constituted entities, the home
and the field are also used to define each other, where the home becomes the home
because it is not the field, and the field becomes the field because it is not home.
Anthropologists Gupta and Ferguson (1997) argue that this mentality structurally imposes
limitations on the home and the field, which are not necessarily physical places, but rather discursive objects – a way of conceptualizing a space with respect to one’s conception of self. However, just by defining the home and field as opposites, a hierarchy is established. ‘If ‘the field’ is most appropriately a place that is ‘not home,’ then some places will necessarily be more ‘not home’ than others, and hence will be more appropriate, more ‘fieldlike’ (Gupta and Ferguson, 13). When there is such a degree of separation between the home and the field, for example Duke and an international project site or even in Durham, it is easier to just analyze the field. With the understanding that the home and the field are opposites, if anything unfamiliar is noted in the field, there is the (false) assumption that there is no difference at home. This leaves the home unexamined. Gupta and Ferguson describe how this difference translates into “othering.”

“What we object to is not the leaving of ‘home,’ but the uncritical mapping of ‘difference’ onto exotic sites (as if ‘home,’ however defined, were not also a state of difference as well as the implicit presumption that ‘Otherness’ means difference from an unmarked, white Western ‘self’)…The issue, then, is not the radical separation between the two that is taken for granted as much by those who would insist that anthropology remain ‘at home’ as by those who would restrict its mission to fieldwork ‘abroad.’” (Gupta and Ferguson, 15)

If one of the explicit goals of DukeEngage is the personal development of the civic engager, it is necessary to take the experience in the field and pick it apart to see how that summer might influence one’s personal conceptualization of the world, including at home.19

This separation between the home and the field prevents introspection and makes it difficult to take a critical look at our own environment. I also have found it difficult to

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19 Although the field of humanitarian aid is different from that of civic engagement, it is still more comfortable to maintain a safe distance between the humanitarian aid worker and the “beneficiary” who is receiving the aid. “It is essential that the beneficiaries of such [humanitarian] efforts would be strangers” (Barnett, 79).
work in a domestic setting, because the fieldsite never ends. I participated in a research project for a course in Fieldwork Methodology where I interviewed Latin American housekeepers in my dorm. I came to know a few of them quite well – one in particular, invited me over to her house to cook mole, invited me to a wedding, and really took the time to teach me about her hometown in Mexico. I fully intended to stay in touch with her, but now that I am living in a different location and I do not travel through that part of campus on a regular basis, I have not seen her in the past year. I feel like I betrayed her friendship because I did not keep in touch with her.

Theoretically, I would imagine that since one of the overt goals of DukeEngage is to promote the personal growth and development of the civic engager, the domestic programs would more closely fulfill those goals and should be more desirable. However, the domestic DukeEngage programs are significantly less popular than the international projects. Despite having thirty available slots for students in Durham, last year DukeEngage continued to keep the applications open for long after the deadline in order to encourage more students to apply. Michelle, who participated in DukeEngage in Durham last summer, estimated that two-thirds of the students who participated in the program did not have DukeEngage Durham listed as their first choice, and instead came to DukeEngage Durham after they did not receive funding for an international or individual project.

Michelle considered why domestic civic engagement projects might not be as enticing to Duke students.

Michelle: “I also think a lot of people don’t want to do domestic service because they think it doesn’t look good on a resume. Or they don’t want to do domestic service because when the poor people or whatever group you’re referring to is right around corner, you have to be much more...”
self-reflective because the problem is no longer at a distance, the problem is right here in your backyard.”

It is significantly more challenging to conduct fieldwork when there is no physical separation between the anthropologist and the field because the observations in the field directly affect the anthropologist, and it is impossible to distance his or herself from the situation. The domestic DukeEngagers did not have the level of separation between themselves and the field that Gupta and Ferguson describe as desirable, making it more difficult for students to ‘disengage’ upon returning to school. The participants in the DukeEngage in Durham program felt they had an obligation to remain involved with their projects after the summer was over and they returned to classes the following semester.

Michelle also notes that working internationally fulfills the ‘doing something’ obligation, and prevents the civic engager from “confronting [his/her] own privilege.” Having participated in many domestic civic engagement and volunteer projects, Michelle discusses how domestic volunteering can be much less appealing and much more challenging to the civic engager.

**Michelle:** I think it's significantly harder because you're more aware of the anger, perhaps, directed towards you. I'm sure there's anger directed to people by some groups no matter what community you're going into.

*But I feel like sometimes if that's a foreign community, you don't pick up on it because you're so lost as to what's going on, especially if people are speaking in a different language.*

**Frances:** Is it because you're not aware of it or because they're not able to express it?

**Michelle:** Perhaps a little bit of both. They're not able to express that they have no other options maybe. Maybe they're speaking another language so you don't understand it, or you don't know the culture so you can't read the cultural cues and therefore you just think they're so happy to have you there.
Whereas in the US, you're more likely to see that there is some anger directed towards you, as in what you are doing might not be the amazing thing that you're envisioning. I feel like perhaps if you're doing service in the US, this is either more likely to happen, and you're more likely to recognize that there are others who are not going to let you stand on your pedestal and be the knight in shining armor.

They're going to give you a reality check pretty quick.

It is easier to help those who are silenced because they do not have the voice to give civic engagers a “reality check”. Michelle argues that if the community members of the civic engagement project are less powerful than the civic engager, it is easier for the civic engagers to continue performing their role of the “helper,” maintaining an unquestioned identity, and prevent the uncomfortable questioning that is necessary for the civic engagement project to influence the individual. (The performance of identity is a general theme of Chapter 3.)

Like Michelle, Ivan Illich argues that domestic projects might provide a more realistic feedback on the effectiveness of the involvement of the civic engagers in the field. In an address to American university volunteers about to engage in a service trip in Mexico, Ivan Illich strives to make the students aware of the power dynamics surrounding both international and domestic projects, and calls on them to be aware of their own positioning and pretentiousness.

“Suppose you went to a U.S. ghetto this summer and tried to help the poor there ‘help themselves.’ Very soon you would be either spit upon or laughed at. People offended by your pretentiousness would hit or spit. People who understand that your own bad consciences push you to this gesture would laugh condescendingly. Soon you would be made aware of your irrelevance among the poor, of your status as middle-class college students on a summer assignment.” (Illich, 6)

Like Michelle, Illich argues that if the university students conducted similar projects in a domestic setting, they would receive more appropriate feedback because community members in a domestic setting would be able to be ‘spit upon or laughed at,’ or given a
Illich encourages students to take that motivation to ‘make a difference’ and use it in a way that will improve their own community, and where they can receive accurate feedback.

“If you have any sense of responsibility at all, stay with your riots here at home. You will know what you’re doing, why you are doing it, and how to communicate with those to whom you speak. And you will know when you fail. If you insist on working with the poor, if this is your vocation, then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go to hell. It is incredibly unfair for you to impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you don’t even understand what you are doing, or what people think of you. And it is profoundly damaging to yourself when you define something that you want to do as ‘good,’ a ‘sacrifice’ and ‘help’….I’m here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the ‘good’ which you intended to do” (Illich, 8).

Illich firmly believes that if university students insist on helping, they should do it where the power dynamics aren’t such that those being ‘helped’ are not silenced. Illich has ‘good’ in quotations because he believes very little good can come from the involvement of the “First World” in the activities of the “Third World” and believes it should be stopped. There will be discussing what it means to do ‘good’ in Chapter 4.

It is important to differentiate between the ability to voice an opinion, and whether those opinions are heard. For example, in terms of the community, one must consider, first, if the community members have the ability to express their opinions, or have the power to express anger and give a civic engager a reality check, and, second, if civic engagers have the ability to perceive when someone in the community provides a reality check or expresses anger. The first deals with the power of voice, and the second addresses cultural competency. The same theory applies to the civic engagers as well. Whereas the power dynamic normally allows them to express their opinions, it does not necessarily mean that the community will hear their opinions, or take them seriously. The communities do not always lack agency. When Dana and I were conducting our
needs assessment, we asked the women in the community what they considered as their most immediate needs. Gail expected them to tell us to replace the bridge crossing the river – it was an eyesore and hardly safe. However, when we talked with the women, they told us that few people actually used the bridge, and what they truly needed was a cement pathway down to the riverbank where they lived. During the rainy season, the steep path became treacherous from the run-off from upper La Carpio, and they needed to be able to evacuate safely should the river levels rise. Gailreallocated funds to help cement the walkway down, but an evangelist group ultimately rebuilt the bridge that no one used, reiterating my point that the community can speak, but they are not always heard.

However, the power dynamic is not as simple as saying everyone in the developing world is powerless and unable to stand up to civic engagers and everyone in the developed world is powerful and can express their opinions. There is still a level of heterogeneity within those two groups. Both communities in developing regions and poorer areas in developed countries seem to share similar problems in a lack of voice. It is ironic that Michelle considers domestic community members to be more able to stand up to the civic engagers, because then she goes on to explain how she is nervous about taking a group of Duke students to work at a soup kitchen in New York because she was afraid the civic engagers would have the conception they were going to save “these poor helpless people.” She is worried the civic engagers might not be aware that their physical presence automatically positions them in a dominant stance, which could leave the homeless people feeling inferior and subordinate. She is concerned they would not understand the implications of their questions, and feel entitled to information that might make the homeless people feel uncomfortable.
Michelle is aware that even if she does not say anything at all, her physical presence influences how people react to her and consider her actions in the field. She came to understand how the people she might interact with during her alternative spring break because of her experience growing up in a poorer household, and interacting with less educated parents. Because Michelle experienced what it was like to grow up in a poorer region, and felt that isolation of being less powerful like when she first came to Duke, she has the double consciousness, or awareness, to see how she herself might be perceived in a different community and it is easier for her to see the complications and potential implications of Duke students working in the field.

Despite civic engagement being marketed as a new entity, it reproduces the historical and structural power differential between the developed and developing worlds. That being said, it is important to recognize that the dualities are not homogenous categories—there are pockets of poverty in high income countries, as Michelle showed, and individuals with wealth in low and middle income countries. The process of realizing this notion, however, implies trying. I followed up with Michelle after Spring Break, to see how the trip went. She said that most of the students who went on the trip had conducted service projects before, so they didn’t ask any inappropriate questions. She said the experience “renewed her potential faith in Duke students.” It is also important to consider the profile of the students who elected to spend their Spring Break working in a soup kitchen in New York. If they were willing to turn down a Spring Break trip, service must be an important part of their lives and chances are have participated in a few service projects of their own. With introspective reflection, more experience doing civic engagement improves the ability to conduct civic engagement
projects more effectively, providing the individual with more examples to draw and learn from.
Chapter 3 – Changing Identities through Interaction

In the last chapter, I discussed how the larger political and historical structures influence the motivations for individuals from high income countries to become involved in the matters of low and middle income countries. But how do those larger power relationships play out in the field? How do civic engagers perform their identities, and how is their presence interpreted by the community members? Conversely, how do the community members portray themselves, and how are they seen by the civic engagers? What does that space of encounter look like? How are their identities influenced and redefined by the interactions with each other in the field?

The civic engagers and community members interact in the field, but their actions are still complicated and colored by the unequal power dynamic discussed in Chapter 2, which establishes the false assumption that identity is static and provide a rhetoric that homogenizes the individuals in the “developed” and “developing” countries or “First World” and “Third World” into solidified dualities. As a result, these labels translate to terms used to homogenize the identity and role of the groups in the field. There is the “helper” and a “helped,” the “provider” and “beneficiary” in the language of humanitarian aid community, the “savers” and the “lost souls” in the language of the missionary groups.
These distinct categories have their roots in neo-colonialism, and are comfortable because they tap into a predetermined description of how we should perform in the field. This acceptance prevents individuals from independently having to justify their rationale, and seeing the heterogeneity of the other group. “As gringos, we rely on heroes and villains. We feel more content with ourselves when we are positioned as moral subjects against the voracious and unjust power structure and as the vehicles of justice for the victims whose side we take” (Nelson, 62). It is easier for civic engagers to feel in solidarity with the “good guys” – a much more comfortable position than constantly reevaluating one’s position and actions in the field. If all civic engagers are part of a solid identity of “do-gooders” then there is little ambiguity surrounding one’s role in the field. Often the civic engagers assume their identity as the service provider, the helper, the hero, and that the nature of their work is inherently good. However, Nelson clarifies that this sense of solidarity, “is in part about enjoyment and about forms of self-fashioning that may not be very self-reflexive” (62). This notion is expressed in how the volunteers choose to portray themselves in the field, and how they perceive the actions of the community members.
There is a constant dialectic and discursive conversation between identity and performance. I am defining identity as the person and characteristics you think you are, and performance as how you think you should think or act. The identity constructs themselves are influenced and defined by the social narrative of how you should behave. For example, an individual might want to be the hero or be the best job applicant with the best resume (performance), and then that becomes part of the individual’s identity. However, as identity is molded and revisited through interactions with others, the individual might discover other priorities. For example, I was naïve when I worked in La Carpio but I quickly came to admire the work that Gail was doing and wanted to perform like her.

But the assumption of the hero and villain implies that the relationship between the civic engager and the community member is static: that everyone knows where they stand, and there is no room for change or interaction. It automatically places the individuals from developed countries as the dynamic actors, and the community members as the passive recipients. By conceptualizing one side as a finite category, the other side inadvertently becomes solid too. By defining civic engagers as the heroes, the other people become the villains. But in the field, those simple categories become much more complex.
Contrary to the solid categories emphasized through the neocolonialist mentalities, Nelson argues, and I agree, that “all identity is formed through articulation, a notion that problematizes traditions of solidarity that lean on ‘solid’ identities and clear-cut divisions between victim and victimizer” (41). Identity is formed and reinforced through interactions with others and is defined both by how individuals portray themselves, and how they are perceived by others. For example, Nelson analyzes the term “gringa,” used in Latin American countries to describe a white person or foreigner, to demonstrate how identities are formed through interactions with others in the field. Although the notion of the gringa is rooted in the historical relationship between the developed and developing world, it is an identity formed in relation. One cannot become a gringa without crossing a border - an individual cannot take on the identity of a gringa by his or herself.

Just as civic engagers have an idea of what they are trying to accomplish, the community members also have their own assumptions about what the civic engagers are doing. Community members also have an idea of how they are portraying themselves, but they might not be aware of how the civic engagers perceive them. Often, there is a difference between the two perspectives. Nelson asks,

“How am I to understand the dissonance between what I think I am doing…and what we are understood to be doing? I think the attack, part of the Quincentennial’s complexity, is difficult for us gringas to deal with because it brings home the fact that we have to give up both our innocent victims and our clear-cut enemies.” (Nelson, 68)

The attack that Nelson refers to occurred when a gringa was murdered in Guatemala, disrupting the assumed political relationship between the gringas and the community members. Realizing this difference can be extremely uncomfortable as it strips away the
comforts of the predefined role, and causes the formation of a new identity, with the incorporation of this gained perspective.

“Gringo/a’ is a category produced through interactions, and as such, it works on a variety of borders including but not limited to national frontiers, stereotypes of phenotypic differences, sartorial codes, and—as ‘gringa’ (marked by the Spanish feminine)—gender boundaries. In turn, the gringa changes the place she goes.” (Nelson, 41)

The identities of both the civic engagers and community members are redefined through their interactions with the other. It is through the interactions with others and working through the uncomfortable moments where we examine our notions of solidarity, become aware of the assumptions we have made about others, redefine our identities, and potentially gain double consciousness.

In this chapter, I will explore the development of identity in the field, both from the perspective of the civic engager and the community member. I want to explore how identity and solidarity are formed through interactions in the field in order to better understand the dynamic between the civic engagers and the community.

**Perspectives from the Field**

As someone who is so constantly involved with the interactions between volunteers and community members, I interviewed Gail Nystrom, founder of the CRHF to gain her insight on the interactions in La Carpio. Being a gringa herself and having worked with the CRHF for 30 years, Gail has mentored many cycles of volunteers and has a good understanding of the nature of the relationship between the volunteers and the community members. As I discussed in the introduction, the CRHF uses volunteers as a source of income to fund the main community efforts, but the role of the volunteers is also central to the CRHF’s main mission statement. While part one of the mission is providing support to at risk populations so they can improve their quality of life, Gail
describes the second part of the CRHF mission statement as, “educating people who provide these services so that they can make more informed decisions about the use of their resources in the future;” an extremely important focus to Gail.

Gail considers the relationships between the community members and the volunteers to be extremely productive sites for changing assumptions about each other and changing identity constructs. She strongly believes that if the organization has the trust and respect of both parties, then it can mediate a constructive interaction where both sides involved learn more about the other and examine unfounded stereotypes. Gail recognizes that volunteers carry a certain set of assumptions about La Carpio, poor people, and what they will accomplish in La Carpio, but she understands the realization and growth as a process, and does her best to provide her volunteers with stepping stones to expanding their perspectives and the scope of what they are able to see. She wants to ensure that the volunteers are changed by the experience and do not leave La Carpio without understanding what life is like there. At the same time, she understands that the people living in La Carpio also have assumptions about the civic engagers, based on the involvement of the United States Contra War, and their interactions with the missionary groups, who in her mind, reinforce counterproductive assumption that white people give free handouts.

Gail considers the interaction between volunteers and community members to be an important method to facilitate the changing of assumptions and redefining of one’s identity.

_Gail:_ Another positive part [about the interactions between the volunteers and community members] is building trust between the two sides. I have so many people say to me, “Oh, La Carpio, it’s so dangerous there,” so they automatically mistrust the place. So we personalize the people who live in La Carpio so that people who are visiting don’t automatically
mistrust them. And the same thing on the other side, we know that people from La Carpio can say, “Oh, the gringos, they’re the ones that bombed our villages.” So, I think that the work of the volunteers is extremely important. It’s extremely important that the volunteers continue to go, but you have to know what you’re doing.

However, in order for the interactions between the volunteers and the civic engagers to be productive in changing the personal conceptions of identity, Gail believes they should be facilitated by a socially responsible organization that is trusted by both parties so that the volunteers and the community members can connect their interactions back to their own lives. She said that the organization needs to have, “a good sense of both cultures, a sense of how to guide [the volunteers’ visits], and has a long term history with the community.”

This foundation of identity formation through interaction serves as the basis for the way Gail structures the interactions between the community members the volunteers. She strongly believes the CRHF should facilitate interactions between the volunteers and the community members and include an element of structured reflection to better understand that encounter. After groups of short term volunteers spend a couple of days working in La Carpio, painting murals, working in the clinic, or picking up trash with the children, Gail take the group to visit La Promesa, which is considered the “after” picture of La Carpio – a success story of what La Carpio could become. Unlike La Carpio, La Promesa is predominantly Costa Rican community, but when the CRHF began working in the community, the living conditions were similar to those in La Carpio. Currently, the community center is nearly completely run by the community, and Gail has facilitated a program for the women who participated in the women’s groups to share the story of La Promesa with the groups of volunteers, and sell their handcrafted jewelry. The volunteer groups pay $5 for each of the students in their groups to watch the performance.
**Gail:** [The volunteers] have to spend time in the community. They can’t just go to one center. They have to go out into the community. That’s why we have the walk-abouts [in La Carpio and La Promesa.] And they have to talk with the women. That’s why we have the women doing the presentations and their round table discussions and their play, because they’re the ones presenting what their lives are like for them. If you don’t put the work that the volunteers do in a context, they may as well not have come. Volunteering is not just they go, they get a tour, they eat lunch, and they leave. But I think this is more than that. That’s what I try to do anyway.

The community members in La Carpio are also changing their assumptions about gringas based on the civic engagers and volunteers who work with the CRHF. Contrary to Illich’s assumption that people in the “developing world” perceive all university students as unwanted oppressors, Gail says that the community’s opinions of the volunteers are determined on a more individual basis, based on their actions as opposed to where they are from. She, and the community, recognize there is a degree of heterogeneity among the volunteers, and judge each volunteer according to their individual behavior.

**Gail:** They perceive the volunteers, both the groups and volunteers as they behave themselves. If they see a group that comes in and they’re all flirty with the boys and they’re all too tired and hot to do any work, then they will see right through them. If, on the other hand, they see that they’re tired but they still work, the see that they’re not flirting around with the boys, or they’re not going, “ew, ew, ew,” then they’ll be okay.

Through interactions with volunteers and Gail’s guidance, the people in La Carpio have started seeing the volunteers as a more heterogeneous group, disproving the assumption that white people are only oppressors and are sources of money. Gail has worked diligently to change their perception that “Here comes the gringo, we’re going to get money.” As Nelson emphasized, both the civic engagers and the community members were changed by the encounter.
Gail does what she can to facilitate that introspection on both parts, but there is no way to guarantee that the volunteers or the community members will ever internalize the experience and be open to changing their perspectives about their identities. Gail has the perspective to understand the changing of stereotypes and assumptions as a process, a process that is slower for some, and faster for others. Because so many of these stereotypes have been engrained in the culture and characterized by history, there need to be continued interactions that slowly ebb away at these preconceived notions and replace them with a new lens for viewing the community. But what happens in the mean time? What happens if you cannot change everyone’s opinions? What are the consequences of that process?

Towards the end of the first summer I worked with the CRHF, Gail asked me to accompany one group of short term volunteers down to the river, and then help translate for the presentation at La Promesa on one of the following days. Being the volunteer’s “tour guide” for La Carpio was extremely uncomfortable, and also showed me how much my perspective had changed in the time I had spent working in the community. By this point, I had worked by the river every day for about six weeks, supporting the education program and interviewing the women for the needs assessment.

It was an incredibly uncomfortable experience for me to speak in English in front of all these individuals who had just begun to accept me. I felt like I was betraying their trust – I felt like I had finally gaining a sense of solidarity with community members, yet here I was fraternizing with “the enemy,” the people I perceived as ignorant short term volunteers who objectified La Carpio. I had spent so long trying to prove to them I was different from the missionaries and the short term volunteers who came for a week and left (even though my visit, too, was time stamped).
Taking the volunteers down to the river changed my lens with which to view the river. It was like I was able to look at the river through a stranger’s eyes, how the volunteers would see the river. All of the sudden, the river took on a different character. The houses went back to being corrugated tin sheets. I saw how filthy the kids really were, and was disgusted that they were walking around barefoot. I saw things I didn’t have time to notice on a daily basis – the smell, the trash. It’s not that I forgot where I was when I was working there with Dana, but as I spent more time in the community I was able to see more. Instead of just seeing the superficial appearance of the river, I had come to see the houses for the families who lived there. The kids had developed identities. I knew their names, their families, who had enough to eat, who went to school, who worked during the day, and how they got along with their brothers and sisters. But I could tell the short term volunteers were not able to see that level of complexity in such a short a period of time. The volunteer group saw the river as I saw it at the beginning of my summer. I realized both how much my perspective had changed through getting to know the people who lived in La Carpio, and how naïve I was when I first arrived. As I learned more about La Carpio, my identity changed, and as my awareness expanded, I was able to see La Carpio in a different light.

I was feeling uncomfortable with the naïveté of the short term volunteers when I accompanied the group to visit La Promesa on one of their last days in Costa Rica. Despite knowing Gail’s intentions with the program, I was extremely bothered by the volunteers’ reactions and was preoccupied with how the women were being treated. The following is an excerpt from my journal describing my observations.

“Now remember how you would play dress up as kids?” Gail introduced the performers at La Promesa. “These women never had that chance, so they’re doing it now.” The traditional Costa Rican music started and the four women began swinging and twirling their long skirts.
It looked as if there was supposed to be some kind of choreography, but, in
typical Costa Rican fashion, each of the four women interpreted it in her
own way creating an unorganized and unprofessional appearance.

The volunteer group had gone down the day before to see the river
community, and the dance and preceding skit were intended to show how
far the La Promesa community, which started out in nearly the same
condition, could grow into a stable neighborhood, with the women now
running a program for the volunteer groups. The idea was good. Noble.
However, instead of creating cultural appreciation and initiating a border
crossing experience for the volunteers, the women’s presentation seemed
to have the opposite effect. The [short term] volunteers were all slouched
down in their seats, unenthused and unengaged. I could tell they were just
waiting for the music to stop so they could get out of there.

After the performance was over, the women split up the volunteers
and led a little tour of their neighborhood. Dana and I tagged along with
one group, and were shocked the volunteers had their cameras out,
snapping pictures of people in their houses, treating them like a circus
display. I can only imagine how demeaning that must have been for the
people who live that life. How is it appropriate to take photos by the river,
while it certainly would not be acceptable in American suburbia? I
wouldn’t even feel comfortable having a parade of tourists coming to my
neighborhood, taking pictures of me jogging or my dog in the yard without
first asking my permission, much less if I wasn’t living in good conditions.

While I’m not entirely opposed to taking photos, I do feel that
taking photographs in that manner creates a sentiment of alienation on the
behalf of the photographed, and an overall sense of ‘othering,’
distinguishing yourself from ‘them,’ pushing them away, keeping them at
the distance of a camera lens. (I’m certainly not arguing I am exempt
from said ‘othering.’ I hesitated to cross over the bridge, and found
myself surprisingly squeamish to give the women of La Libertad pedicures
because I didn’t want to touch their feet with my hands. But the difference
is that I have been here long enough that I am able to pick up when I am
distancing myself in that regard. I think the danger comes when someone
is unaware of the effects of their actions in the first place.)

By the time the volunteers returned from their tour around the
neighborhood, the women had set up tables of earrings, bracelets, and
necklaces they had prepared for sale. Like the performance, the jewelry
was nice, but not of impressive quality. It was implied that the volunteers
were expected to buy some of the jewelry. The volunteers went from table
to table, holding up the jewelry, asking for their friend’s opinions,
complementing or criticizing, and either putting it back on the table or
buying the piece. I felt torn. On one hand, the women of La Promesa
were earning money from their work, but at the same time, it seemed as
though the volunteers were buying the crafts out of pity. They just toured
the streets, saw the dilapidated conditions, and now they had the choice
whether or not they wanted to be a good human being by either buying or
not buying the jewelry. I imagine it was difficult for the women to see
their jewelry picked up, criticized, and then dismissed. Almost like they
themselves were not good enough. Granted, selling the jewelry gave the women money. Money they needed to establish self-sufficiency and independence. But at what cost? Was it worth it?

I wonder what the women of La Promesa think of their performance and of the audience. Did they even pick up on the volunteers’ reactions? Do the women really care what the volunteers thought? I have a hard time believing they would put aside their self dignity to receive the $5 they earn for every volunteer.

I just can’t get over how the performance could evoke the exact opposite response than desired. Granted, maybe the performance could have been a bit more professional, the dance a bit more choreographed, but still. The ‘othering’ was undeniable. All of the long term volunteers had the same reaction. But I don’t know why. I don’t know why the group of short term volunteers had such an adverse reaction to the presentation. I worked with them before when I took them down with me to the river, and if they were mature enough to handle the river, they should definitely have been able to appreciate La Promesa. I don’t know why, and it’s frustrating because the consequences, the othering, is extremely detrimental to the dignity and self respect of the community at La Promesa and elsewhere.

Gail considered the visit to La Promesa as a successful step towards changing perceptions of both the volunteers and the community members. I interpreted the same event as a replication and reinforcement of the assumptions of the prescribed power roles - ineffective and detrimental in changing identities, and the goals of the CRHF. While I saw photography as a way to objectify the poor, Gail saw it as an effective “visual reminder of the experience” they had in La Carpio. While I saw the skit, tour, and jewelry sale as demeaning for the women, she believes selling their crafts is a point of pride for the women. I feel like those encounters have the same potential to reinforce the labels prescribed by neo-colonialism. But just the same, Gail believes that:

“If [the organizations] handle volunteering right, [the community] should be able to make an impact on their lives as much as they make an impact on the other people’s lives, and the other people. The people of La Carpio, should feel really proud of the impact they are having on the volunteers’ lives.”

How is it possible that Gail and I had very opposite reactions to the same event? I understand her logic, and I understand mine. I am certainly not arguing that her
perspective is wrong, and my reactions were correct, moreover I am using the different logics to demonstrate the ambiguity of the encounter. This example highlights the ambivalence of the involvement in the field.

Conversely, my reservations towards photo taking might also be a paternalistic reaction and inadvertently render the community members powerless by tapping into the fascination of the exotic. For example, Lynn Meisch critiques an anonymous author’s account of photo taking among the Otavaleños. “The anonymous author writes: ’Please ask everyone you try to photograph, for permission. Because here a lot of Indians believe that they will lose their soul when you take a picture of them’” (Meisch, 435). Meisch states that although the writer is correct to ask permission, “the reason is not beliefs about soul loss, but common courtesy” (Meisch 453). By referring to them as such, it implies that they are primitive and lacking an independent voice.

Another point of different perceptions was that of the sale of jewelry at La Promesa. Gail recognizes that the interactions are particularly volatile environments that could result in changing of opinions, or reproduction of behavior. Or both. Despite seeing the interactions as constructive spaces, Gail is not oblivious to the harm that can result from the attitudes of the volunteers.

**Gail:** One lady said to me, “And I understand that the ladies are going to sell their wares.” And I said, “No, what they’re giving you is a proud exhibit of the beautiful creative things that they make. And if you make a choice to buy, that’s up to you, but they’re not selling their wares.” I mean, it was just such a crass way to describe it. The women do work hard to make their crafts and they do want to sell them because they eat from that, and then the gringos come in and turn their noses at that and walk away.

So, I mean, that’s my debate. I teach them to fish, but then the next part is: then you buy the fish. If you don’t want to have to give them fish, and you want them to learn to fish, and we teach them to fish, then who in the world is going to buy the fish, if not you? So it’s about developing social responsibility, and some people find this all very weird.
Gail is also concerned with the volunteers’ reactions of pity, which she describes as, “Oh the poor things, let’s help them,” and looking down on the community, a perspective exemplified with a reaction of: “Oh my god, look at this bag, it doesn’t even have a proper zipper on it.” She doesn’t want the volunteers to buy the jewelry out of sympathy, but she does not want the volunteers not to buy the crafts because they are not made well. She wants them to buy the jewelry because they should buy the jewelry. Gail sees the volunteers’ role to support the La Carpio community. Even though she is trying to teach the La Carpio community that gringos are not outflows of money, she encourages the volunteers to buy the crafts that the women provided because it is their democratic responsibility to support the poor, tapping into the neo-colonialist roles of provider and beneficiary – the same categories she is trying to complicate by the interactions between the community members and volunteers.

**Differing Perceptions of Self**

When I went to La Carpio I thought I was different. When I worked in La Carpio, I tried to distance myself from the other groups who worked there. I was not an evangelist. I was not simply a volunteer, and I certainly was not an “inconsiderate, insensitive” short term volunteer, as I described them in my journal. No, I thought I was different from those other groups. I was more aware, and my work was going to make more of a difference. In the field, I felt stripped of all my usual crutches of American culture, my friends, familiar aspects, and instead I was challenged to figure out who I was, and who I wanted to be. I believed I had a better understanding of La Carpio than all the other volunteers, which is why I was surprised when I found that I was also
implicated in the power relationship, when Marlene, who I considered a friend, asked me for money. I wrote this fiery journal entry right afterward.

There’s a new epidemic of momentous proportions ravaging the streets of La Carpio. Everyone has it. And it’s contagious. It will suck you into its vicious cycle whether or not you’re aware of it. It’s the fiebre del gringo. Gringo fever. The oh-so-appropriate term coined by the women working in La Libertad. Symptoms include the flock of kids to the gringos, the noticeable rise of attendance at the guardería when Gail pays a visit, the constant questioning of when more gringos are coming. It’s the influx of money, food, bunk beds, toys, candy with the arrival of the white people. Dana and I had both seen it. The rich people giving to the poor, and the poor making the rich feel fulfilled. And both groups associating the other with that identity.

And they know how to play the part. Lalo, one of the evangelist ministers, stood up on the bridge during our little activity in the morning, calling all the kids over, telling them he had candy to give them if they would follow him up to the church, like a knight in shining armor coming to save the lost souls of the poor. The kids play into it too, whether or not it is intentional. Who doesn’t want to be greeted by a flood of kids running out of their houses, so tickled to give you hugs and hold your hand? Miguel gives his cute little puppy dog face, winning over the heart of every volunteer. He certainly got me. Still does.

I observed the interactions between the missionaries and the kids, and was aware of it, but I never let it bother me. I thought we Dana and I had successfully evaded the worst of it, that we weren’t really caught up in all that drama, and at times even doubted its existence. But during our interview with Marlene, one of the women who we have talked with the most through our entire time here, I was forced to reconsider. She asked us if there was any way we could help her pay for the 35,000 colones ($70) by July 28th for her son’s surgery. She took us to see Luis. We heard his story: an accidental gun wound intended for someone else had landed him with seven perforations of his intestines, a thirteen day hospital stay, and one large scar. I was thrilled she was actually coming to us with her concerns, trusting us for help. We said we would see what we could do.

But when we talked to Gail, we heard quite a different story. She said that she had already given Marlene the money to cover Luis’ surgery and hospital stay. As had one of the evangelist church groups from up farther up in La Carpio.

I am always eager to give people the benefit of the doubt, believe the best. I trusted her. But now I feel betrayed. Deceived. Exploited. Used. It is so disheartening to think that all that time we spent building up a relationship could have been founded on false pretenses.

She’s caught gringo fever, and, in my gullibility, I’m pulled along for the ride. I feel like such a cynic. It’s rather depressing. So uncharacteristic. But I guess that’s just reality, right? The cold, hard
truth. People using people. Desperate people taking desperate measures. I know that these people are trying so hard to make ends meet, to improve their lives and the lives of the children. I guess I can understand what would bring someone to use the gringas who come down every day to play with the kids to have some extra money to feed their family. But why Marlene? Why Dana and me? It sucks. It’s hard not to take it personally, but I know I shouldn’t. Poverty drives people to make those difficult decisions.

This was the first time I really saw myself implicated in the grand landscape of humanitarianism in La Carpio. I was able to see how Miguel playing into the role of the cute little kid around the missionary groups was the same as Marlene using me to get money for her family. I thought the relationship I had with Marlene was different, but she was using me to get what she wanted, just like the community members were entertaining the evangelists to receive their donations. If all the other white people who work in La Carpio have little handouts, then why wouldn’t she ask? She’s just being resourceful. I just thought I was different. I thought we were friends, and we probably were. I have no doubt that had she received the money, she would have used it for the family, something responsible, but it still stung that instead of seeing me as me, she saw me as money. I did not like feeling used. I realized that it was nothing necessarily personal, it was more a symptom of the situation, but it still felt as though it discounted the friendship we had established. When I told Gail about what happened, she helped me contextualize the experience within the context of Marlene’s life, and demonstrate the importance of the interaction between the volunteers and the community.

Gail: It’s the nature of their need. Because their need is so great, they sometimes put aside correct ethical action and that’s also an advantage of having volunteers, because it forces them, as long as someone like me is there to give them feedback, it forces them to look at how they’re behaving. And they know that I get really angry with them if they do something bizarre. So if the volunteers weren’t there to test that all the time, they would never have the chance to prove it for themselves, or test it for themselves.
Marlene might also have a different understanding of money. Whereas I interpreted her asking me for money as manipulation, she might have viewed asking as an act of friendship. She must have known I had money in order to travel so far from home, and if I had extra money, then why wouldn’t I give some to her, if I was her friend. In La Carpio, people help friends in need.

Earlier in the summer, Marlene told me that I was no longer a gringa. Even though Gail swore “gringa” was not a derogatory term, it felt so great for them to tell me I was not a foreigner. I felt like I really understood how things worked, like I was different from all the other volunteers, and that felt good. Nelson also confronted this label:

“People would often laugh, surprised, if I self-identified as gringa. They might say ‘Oh no, you’re not really a gringa. You’re not like those others,’ which would always please me. It seems to mean ‘ugly American’ and imperialist, condensing many highly charged emotions around global inequalities, wealth, color, cultural capital, commodity access, military aid, rude tourists, and complex imaginaries of Rambo and Madonna.” (Nelson, 63)

Like Nelson, I took this to mean I was different from the other volunteers who did not understand what La Carpio was really about. It made me feel special, needed. But if I was “special,” then why was Marlene treating me like she treated the other short term volunteers and evangelists I tried so hard to prove I was not?

What was so difficult for me to realize was that our relationship between us was complex. I always imagined myself in the individual sense – I was Frances Aunon, the not-American American, the not-ignorant volunteer, the not-gringa white person. However, Marlene didn’t always perceive me the way the way I imagined myself. Sometimes Marlene saw me as Frances Aunon, and sometimes she saw me as the gringa. It was difficult for me to realize, however, that although I felt stripped and released from
the culture that I knew, the communities I worked with still saw me as very much a part of that culture that I felt so distanced from.

It is not like the people in La Carpio had not seen an American. They were very well aware of American pop culture, and interacted with American volunteers, missionary groups, etc. on a regular basis. To the naked eye, I was the same as the evangelists who walked up and down the streets trying to build their congregation and the tourists who hit up the beaches and bought the trinket souvenirs. During her fieldwork in Guatemala, Nelson was confronted by similar assumptions that dealt with:

“I wanted to think myself different from these foreigners, but in the eyes of Guatemalans, my self-representations are folded into complex and overdetermined understandings...Thus my body image as a helpful North American academic must include the image other bodies have of me, which includes bundles of stereotypes, images, and histories. As such, I am always already participating in identificatory processes informed by my own imaginings and fantasies, and at the same time, I figure in the fantasies of others.” (53-54)

For someone who spends so much time imagining oneself as separate from American culture, at first, it can be different to see how your image can be part of the larger patchwork of American influences. I tried to differentiate myself from the short term volunteers, and portray myself as different from the stereotypical, apple pie eating, flag flying, white porch sitting, and gun shooting American. And so it was extremely frustrating when Marlene lumped me in with all the other people, who I considered were less effective.

Although an unpleasant experience, I was able to learn so much about how I was received and perceived in the field because I was able to see, acknowledge I was feeling uncomfortable, and work to make sense of that. However, not everyone has a similar process. For example, Leah had a similar experience with a young jewelry seller in Belize. Leah traveled to Belize for a weeklong trip through Pathways, a Duke-based
Christian group. She explained that like many of the children in Belize, Nancy sold jewelry to the church groups that came to work at the church and church-run school. Leah and the rest of the Duke group moved into their hotel for the week, but before dinner every night, the Belizean children would climb the trees and talk to the group before they went to dinner. Nancy attracted Leah’s attention because she seemed friendly, and had a cut hand. When Leah asked what had happened, Nancy told her that she had cut her hand on a piece of glass in order to attract the attention of her older sister. Nancy told Leah her mother had abandoned them, and how she was frequently beaten with a VCR tape by her brothers.

Just as I felt flattered when Marlene asked me for help, Leah was glad to provide a listening ear: “Having her open up to me and tell me all that was a lot [to process], but like I think I was there so she could tell someone. I don’t think most of the kids would open up to the volunteers that much. And like, I just met her from her coming to the hotel, before we would go to dinner every night, so that was pretty awesome, for me to hear, and for me to understand. But I mean, obviously it’s terrible that that goes on.” She wanted Nancy to confide in her – it made her feel special, like she was making a difference in her someone’s life.

When Leah first told me the story of her “friendship” with Nancy, I thought back to the women selling jewelry for the volunteers at La Promesa. I remembered how they led the volunteer groups through their neighborhood, showing them, as I interpreted, how poor they really were, and, ideally, to increase the potential that the volunteers would purchase their crafts. I asked, and sure enough, Leah purchased all of her gifts from Nancy, because she felt moved by her story and wanted to do what she could to help. I asked her if she thought Nancy told her the story in order to gain her sympathy, knowing
that she would be more likely to buy some of her jewelry. Leah said she felt they had a real friendship, and didn’t entertain the thought. I think it is important to consider the possibility that, like Marlene, Nancy might have been manipulating the system to get what she wanted. I certainly don’t mean to belittle Nancy’s situation or imply that she was lying and manipulating, but I do think it is important to consider the possibility that Leah was being used because of her status as an American. Imagine how much jewelry Nancy would sell if she befriended one volunteer every trip. It seemed as though they were both performing their identities: Leah was the provider, serving as the supporter for Nancy, the helpless, victimized child.

Liisa Malkki helps us understand the performative element often produced by the power relationships between refugees and humanitarian aid in the field. She describes how when people are placed in a refugee situation, they, “stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general: universal man, universal woman, universal child, and universal family” because there are such defined roles (224). The humanitarian aid is there to provide assistance, and the refugees are there to receive the aid. Consequently, being a refugee also constituted behaving in a particular manner to receive the attention and services of the help provided. “There was a pronounced tendency to try to identify and fix the ‘real’ refugee on extralegal grounds. And one key terrain where this took place was that of the visual image of the refugee, making it possible to claim that given people were not real refugees because they did not look (or conduct themselves) like real refugees. This suggests that refugee status was implicitly understood to involve a performative element…It appeared that the staff, in an effort to do their jobs properly, and to direct assistance where it might be needed most, were in some manner trying to identify exemplary victims” (Malkki, 231). In order to gain Leah’s sympathy, and
consequent money, Nancy conducted herself as an “exemplary victim,” having been abandoned and beaten, to showcase those stories that would voice a strong emotional reaction, appealing to the “wannabe savior” side of volunteers.

The consequence of performing the prescribed roles is that it causes people in the developing countries to act poor in order to attract the attention of the individuals from the developed country. For example, humanitarian aid is provided to those who fit their definition of the neediest, and expect the refugees to appear a certain way. “So in the ideal construct, the ‘real refugee,’ was imagined as a particular kind of person: a victim whose judgment and reason had been compromised by his or her experiences. This was a tragic, and sometimes repulsive, figure” (Malkki, 232). The refugees, who want aid, have realized that in order to gain aid, they will mold their behavior to fit the projected image of “the neediest.” The problem with this is they aspire to be “the neediest” and those who truly are in need of humanitarian assistance might not be the ones receiving aid. There is an inherent contradiction when the goal of the humanitarian aid organizations is to improve the quality of life for the refugees, but in order to receive aid, the refugees must act helpless. If Nancy becomes dependent on the influx, and sympathy, of the volunteers to buy necklaces, she will remain reliant on the volunteers for her livelihood and perpetuate the low income countries’ dependency on the high income countries.

Although Leah and I experienced very similar situations, I was able to learn from my experiences and grow as an individual, but Leah was not able to recognize that she could have been being used in the first place until extensive prompting during our interview. It is also important to recognize that while I had spent one week and two summers working in La Carpio, Leah was only in Belize for one week, so she had even
less time to become acclimated to the culture and understand how the community
functioned. The manner in which individuals perceive each other and the subsequent
interactions have a profound impact on the effect of civic engagement projects. Leah’s
inability to see how her involvement might have resulted in harm is dangerous because it
prevents her from better understanding her interactions in the field, and look for potential
consequences of her involvement in the field. She could just have been earlier in the
process of reflection and discovery.

A civic engager or community member’s interpretation of their role in the field is
often, subconsciously, informed by the individual’s background and the institutionalized
power dynamics defining the developed and developing worlds. However, this identity is
constantly changed and redefined through interactions with the other in the field through
a process of acknowledging assumptions. This is malleable quality of identity is
important to consider because it permits civic engagement experiences to be constructive
for both the community members and the civic engagers.
Chapter 4 – Harm in the Field

In Chapter 3, I discussed how the power relationships interact in the field, and now the next step is to see how those interactions between the civic engager and the community continue to impact the community. I will highlight some of these tensions by sharing Mary’s story.

I met Mary during my second summer working at the CRHF. Like me, she was a rising junior at a prestigious university and had already spent a considerable amount of time in La Carpio. Two years prior, Mary spent four months volunteering with the CRHF and disagreed with the manner in which the CRHF was involved in La Carpio. She felt compelled to return to La Carpio to conduct a research project evaluating the community’s perspective on the effectiveness of the CRHF in addressing the community needs. Mary did not feel as though she could obtain an unbiased assessment of the program’s overall effectiveness if she conducted her research through the CRHF. Instead of volunteering with the CRHF and staying with a CRHF homestay, Mary opted for the more ‘authentic’ experience and used her connections fostered from her four month stay years prior to ask a family living directly in La Carpio to host her for the summer for $400 compensation per month, the same rate that Gail organized for the CRHF volunteers staying in homestays in suburban areas surrounding La Carpio.

Mary wanted the authentic La Carpio experience. She wanted to live in a slum, eat what they ate, sleep where they slept, expecting to gain a better understanding of what it was like to live in La Carpio. Whenever I spoke with her, she always seemed to be bragging about the “rough” living conditions, but at the same time, she wanted to improve her host family’s living conditions. She introduced changes that improved their overall living conditions as she became more aware of the needs of the family. She
purchased socks for the family, new shoes for the children, and a professional shirt for the father to wear when he went to look for employment. Mary took sponge baths, but bought a water heater for the family so she could heat up her water faster. Although Mary was seeking the true La Carpio experience, by staying in La Carpio, she changed the very authenticity both she, and they, originally desired, making them more aligned with her standards of living.

When she reached the end of her two month stay, Mary still had extra funding, and decided to give that, along with her Costa Rican cell phone to her host family in La Carpio, justifying that the grant was intended to be used in La Carpio and the money would be of great value to the family and would make their lives easier.

On paper, Mary appeared well prepared to have a positive impact in the community and poised to generate insightful information. She immersed herself in the culture, living as close with the people as she could, which would allow her to stay close to her informants and better understand their daily life. Mary conducted a follow up project, delivered her written report to her university but not to the CRHF, exploring concerns she identified during her first four month period in La Carpio. Consequently, not only was she familiar with the dynamics in La Carpio and how the CRHF interacted with the community, but she was fluent in Spanish, and had strong financial backing and mentoring from her university.

But when she left, all hell broke loose.

The community nearly revolted against Mary’s host family. In addition to the $400 per month, socks, shoes, shirts, and water heater, the remainder of Mary’s grant
totaled nearly $1,500. In a community where many families struggle to make ends meet, that is equivalent to winning the lottery. This enormous financial disturbance created a great level of animosity among neighbors who did not understand why that one family deserved to get so much money, appliances and material possessions when they did not receive anything.

The community began to reject Mary’s host family, destroying their social network and consequent security in La Carpio. People were no longer interested in visiting the family’s shop, and everyone thought they were entitled to some cut of Mary’s money. In an extremely poor community, where bartering and relationships are often the basis for everyday life, the social isolation was extremely devastating to the family. When Mary left, the father of the family left for several days with a significant chunk of the money, and presumably drank it away. That money never came back to the family, as Mary intended. In an effort to regain the trust of the community members, the mother of the family threw an extravagant party with the new music speakers the family purchased with their new financial bonus. They spent nearly all of their money on a party to salvage the social rapport the money caused them to lose.

Mary went to Costa Rica with the best of intentions. She had been to her fieldsite before, had prepared for her project, was trained in research methods, had strong faculty mentoring from her prestigious university, and was fluent in the local language. Even though she had the skills necessary for a successful project, her two months in the field managed to have severe consequences that jeopardized the reputation of an organization and a family, disrupting a delicate balance Mary was not aware existed. She also left before realizing the impact of her involvement in La Carpio. The negative consequences came into full effect after she returned to the United States. To my knowledge, Mary
remains completely unaware about the harm that resulted from her involvement in La Carpio\textsuperscript{20}, and could go back to her university, present a glowing project, and receive all the accolades for a project well done.

Mary’s story has prompted me to ask several questions. First, what is considered a “good,” “bad,” or “harmful” project? Second, how do individuals conceptualize their work? Do they consider the possibility that their work might have had negative consequences? Why might this recognition of harm be a potentially uncomfortable realization? Third, what is being done on an institutional level to reduce harm? And finally, are there any positive impacts?

**The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: A Glossary of Civic Engagement**

Before discussing the impact of a harmful project, it is necessary to identify what constitutes a “good,” “bad,” or “harmful” project. I asked all of my interviewees for their definitions, and similarly to their definitions of “civic engagement,” received a wide range of varied responses. Their personal experiences influenced how they conceptualized the meaning behind the labels. I took their responses and categorized them based on characteristics of the project, individual, and community. Presenting the definitions in this format is especially effective because it allows you to read the columns to understand the cross section of definitions for the different caliber of civic engagement project. Reading across the rows allows you to understand how an individual conceptualizes the scale of good/bad/harmful civic engagement projects.

\textsuperscript{20} I tried to contact Mary to include her perspective in my thesis, but I could not obtain her contact information.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Bad</th>
<th>Harmful</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- benefits community and self</td>
<td>- focused on results</td>
<td>- built on the premise that “we, the foreigners, know better”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- allows you to recognize universality of problems</td>
<td>- focused on results</td>
<td>- reliance on Western methodology that might be inappropriate for cultural context</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Individuals</strong></td>
<td>- do not care about the people they are trying to ‘help’</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- solving the problem for everyone’s benefit</td>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td>- does not attempt to form relationships or make an effort to understand the community, and remains unable to realize the faults in their actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- able to learn from the community, good listener</td>
<td>- ‘helped’ will not be empowered to help themselves</td>
<td><strong>Individuals</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- form deep relationships with community enabling cultural competency and better understand community problems</td>
<td><strong>Individuals</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- resolve the root causes of the problems</td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Michelle</strong></td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
<td>- horribly organized</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- self-reflection is encouraged</td>
<td><strong>Individuals</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- develop a future plan for service</td>
<td>- don’t learn anything</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Individuals</strong></td>
<td>- fail to connect the project to their own environment/surroundings and identity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- learn something</td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- consider the ramifications of their actions</td>
<td>- the need for the project isn’t articulated by the population being served</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- sustainability is not a goal, and project is not turned over to the community</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- “helping” is the focus instead of “empowering”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- community members are not consulted and are barred from participation and leadership.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Jessica</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- builds mutual understanding between the service providers and the community</td>
<td>- generates senses of superiority and inferiority among the parties involved</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- changing worldview</td>
<td>- makes civic engagers think they are helping someone else</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- neglects ethical or cultural elements of the parties involved</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- imposes the ideas of one group over another</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Leah</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Project</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- focus on community action, community building and collective action, rather than just service</td>
<td>- no full time investment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- addresses a relevant issue</td>
<td>- lack of cohesion with the partner community or organization</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Individuals</strong></td>
<td>- top-down action by outsiders, reinforcing social structures that have led the community to its current state</td>
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The interviewees often described harmful or bad projects as not reflecting the needs of the community, or not creating change. They provided surprisingly considerate responses, acknowledging cultural sensitivity, and the influences of paternalistic, “top-
down” involvement of the high income countries. These definitions are necessary in order to understand how the interviewees contextualize and cope with harm.

**Understanding Harm: Rationalizing and Reality Distortion**

The individual’s perceptions and interpretations of their civic engagement project are shaped by their backgrounds and perspectives, motives and goals, and beliefs and experience, as well as the institutionalized frameworks of their funding agency, like DukeEngage. In her book, *Condemned to Repeat*, Fiona Terry argues that because of the paradoxes of aid, all projects cause some aspect of harm, and that the goal of humanitarian aid should not be to eliminate harm, but reduce it. In order to understand how humanitarian aid workers conceptualize and rationalize their involvement in a field where so often the outcomes are mixed, she discusses Mark Walkup’s theory on the psychology of coping with the high stress environment of the humanitarian aid field. Although humanitarian aid and civic engagement have slightly different fields, this psychology still applies to civic engagement because they both have goals of changing their fieldsite. I will focus on two factors: rationalization of their involvement, and reality distortion.

In order to cope with not reaching a goal, aid workers, “begin to rationalize behavior by transferring guilt away from themselves toward other factors, like ‘politics,’ ‘donors,’ the ‘host government,’” and even the ‘victims,”’ the structural violence exacerbating the situation and hindering the effectiveness of humanitarian aid (Terry, 226). This transfer of blame to a system they have no control over allows the aid workers to justify their inability to change a situation. Although Terry considers this rationalization as a part of the transferring of blame, it is also true that structural violence hinders the effectiveness of the projects in the field.
Terry says that oftentimes the individual’s reluctance to admit his or her actions might have resulted in harm is “due in part to a sense that benevolence should somehow be above critical scrutiny, that acts undertaken with good intentions can be excused from judgment” (226). Aid personnel often become indignant when their “good will and hard work” are under scrutiny, which Terry says, “manifest in sentiments from ‘at least we tried’ to ‘you can’t put a price on life’ (226). I also saw symptoms of this mentality in my interviews. When I asked Leah what percentage she thought she contributed to the community, and what percentage she gained, she said the split was 90/10. She saw herself benefiting significantly more than she was benefiting the community. I asked her if she thought there was a problem with the unequal divide, and she responded: “No, I mean, 10 percent is 10 percent. Otherwise it would be zero percent. And then if you add all of our 10 percents together, then it’s 120 percent. I mean, every little bit helps.” She is under the impression that whatever help she provides is a positive and desired contribution, and there is little potential for critique. It is interesting to note that despite their reluctance to criticize, aid workers are “quick to point out the errors of other organizations while maintaining that ‘our organization is different,'” (Terry, 226).

When reassigning the blame to structural conditions “no longer satisfies or protects the ego, or when it is no longer possible to conceal the inadequacies,” Fiona Terry says that the humanitarian aid workers move to the second framework: reality distortion: “aid workers create false illusions of success to enable them to feel a sense of self-worth and accomplishment in the midst of institutional inadequacy or failure” (226). Terry argues that this distortion of reality results in two consequences that impede the organizations from learning from their experiences: a “culture of justification” that
protects the public image of humanitarian aid, and “institutional self-preservation” so that the organization itself is seen as legitimate.

In order to understand how my interviewees conceptualized their own civic projects, I asked if they believed there was the potential that their project caused any harm. I wanted to understand how common Mary’s situation is in the field of civic engagement—is it common for civic engagement projects to cause harm? Are civic engagers able to recognize that? If my interviewees’ projects caused harm to the community, how do they rationalize the experience?

By and large, it was easier for my interviewees to acknowledge the possibility that their projects had minimal impact than to acknowledge that their projects might have caused harm. This question, however, was the one question that many interviewees continued to revisit throughout the interview. When I first asked Erica whether her project could have caused harm, she responded that she didn’t see a problem with her project. She rationalized its limited impact and effectiveness was a result of the structural violence, but even though the project might not have done anything, it was not harmful:

**Erica:** I don't know about harm, but I think there is a possibility that our project didn't do anything. [laughs] First, we structured it, so were basically dealing with the effects of whatever - we're not dealing with the root cause. We're not going to go petition to the government and make them change, and we're not out in the streets telling people to stop being racist.

So I think there is a possibility that it didn't do anything, but I don't know if I'd say it did any harm. I think you needed to be doing something more significant to do harm or good, and I feel like what we were doing wasn’t too significant.

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21 I recognize these questions are rather contradictory. An interviewee would provide the same answer if she conducted an entirely positive project, or if the civic engager, in fact, cause harm, but was entirely unable to see the consequences. Because of that, I paid close attention to the manner in which the interviewees answered my question. Did they start answering one way, and then switch courses? Were there long pauses in their responses? Did they grapple with the question or provide a straightforward answer?
Later in the interview, Erica completely deviated from the question I had asked to revisit her response and continued:

*But then, I guess, if I think about it, maybe there is something that we could have done that was harmful. [pause] I don’t know. I think every time I wasn’t really fully prepared for the lesson, I felt like I was doing harm, because I was just wasting their time. Wasting their time so I could feel like I’m doing civic engagement, Maybe I’m just forcing these kids to go through terrible lessons that are not going to stick, when a professional teacher could actually do a better job.*

She was concerned that the kids she taught would feel abandoned by her return to the United States, and felt guilty that she was leaving, and the kids were just staying there.

*We told them that, "Oh, we might not come back," but then for kids it’s hard to tell them that, "Hey, we might not come back because we have to do internships," or, I don’t know, “something with our careers.” I think they’ll gradually forget us because they are kids, but I don’t know. I still worry about if they think we’re coming back and we don’t. I do worry about that.*

Erica’s rationalization for why her project had minimal impact aligns directly with the theory of rationalization. She noted how she was addressing the topical issues in China, the symptoms of deeply rooted problems instead of addressing the problems themselves (similar to the paradox of humanitarian aid.) Because she felt guilty about leaving the children she was working with in the same state they were in when she came, she had to attribute the cause to something other than her inability to create change. If the emphasis of DukeEngage is to create change, then is a project that “[doesn’t] do anything” a failure?

The fact that Erica initially did not believe her civic engagement project caused any harm, and then returned to amend her answer demonstrates that she most likely was not accustomed to considering her project in those terms of potential harm, or used to expressing her doubts. The harm that she does acknowledge is founded in personal
insecurities, wondering whether there is someone more qualified to do the same project, and expanding her focus to consider the effects on the kids. Erica expresses her concerns as though she has entertained thoughts about them before, but is not accustomed to sharing them in this context. This could be indicative of the Duke culture of achievement encompassing civic engagement. Often, students feel pressure to be the best, so it is advantageous for them to frame their experiences in the most positive light possible, perform like they had an ideal project. Since Erica participates in civic engagement in order to position herself favorably for future employment and to gain work experience, it would be detrimental for her to acknowledge the potential negative consequences of her civic engagement project.

Erica’s discussion on harm also highlights the potential disconnect between how the students and community view the civic engagement projects. Erica mentions how difficult it was to explain to the children that preparing for her career through internships or other diversified experiences took precedence over returning to work with them at the school. This highlights how she perceives civic engagement as a method to gain the skills necessary to prepare her for a successful career as opposed to solely a learning experience.

While Erica focused more on her active role in the field, Jessica concentrated on the effects of U.S. volunteers in the field. She acknowledged the potential for harm immediately and considered the implications of having U.S. students providing assistance to an ostracized population, comparable to her experience as a Chinese minority attending a school run by volunteers.

*Frances:* So, do you think there was any potential for a harm to come from your project in Cairo?
Jessica: I think so. A group of Duke students from the U.S. go to Cairo, which is supposed to be the Egyptians' Cairo. But, we were not helping the Egyptians. We were helping Somalians and Ethiopians who are discriminated against by the Egyptians. It's like [the Egyptians ask], "Why are you on my land? Why don't you go back to your own country?" Now, we were helping those people. You think you are helping these people, but after you leave, what happen to those families and kids?

Of course, I don't think that DukeEngage team would be that harmful, but I feel, somehow, the Egyptians would think that, "Why are you guys getting helped?" Of course, majority of Egyptians would understand that these people are homeless. But, some people would think that, "Why are you getting helped on our land?" Somehow, I think, there would be a conflict. It's possible, the harm is possible.

Jessica is aware of the consequences that might unfold simply because of the civic engager’s presence in the field. One aspect that was unique in my interviews was the consideration of the impact of her project after she left. Unlike Mary’s perspective, Jessica is aware that the individuals the civic engagers were working with might become targets after they return to Duke.

Frances: Do you think the risk of harm is worth the risk of doing it anyway?

Jessica: I think it is more worthwhile to do it than to avoid the risk. I think, every time you do something, you have to take maybe some kind of risk.

The thing is, "Who is getting the risk? Who is actually risking?" We were going to be [in Cairo] for two month, and then we were going to leave; nothing was going to happen to us. But, what if one of the kids got beaten up by some random Egyptian kids who think that, "Why are you getting help on our land by Americans?" I mean, that’s just my guess, but who knows?

Jessica says that there is the risk for harm in every action, but that does not justify inaction or complacency. While she acknowledges the inherent risk in any sort of change, she also makes the astute observation about who is bearing the brunt of that risk. Going back to the power dynamic discussed in Chapters 2, the community members are
often the communities that deal with the consequences of the actions of the civic engagers because they have less of a voice to dictate how projects are executed.

Leah takes a different approach. Unlike Erica and Jessica, she does not recognize that her actions could have had negative impacts on the community, and instead focuses on the group’s impact on the community organization.

*Frances:* Do you think there is any potential that your project did any harm?

*Leah:* I can’t think how we specifically could have caused any harm because the school depends on volunteers to function. I think it would be more harmful if we weren’t there, because they wouldn’t have the resources that they need. When we came, we brought vitamins, shoes, we paid the cooks, we paid other money for water, and I’m sure they’re making money off of us.

Although Leah does not see how her project could have resulted in harm, she acknowledges an important point: often the organizations themselves benefit from hosting civic engagers. Just as civic engagers do not always cause harm, community organizations are not always reluctant to welcome them. Leah’s group brought supplies and resources to the organization, and brought buyers into the community. While Leah saw her role as beneficial to the organization, an organization’s dependency on foreign aid isn’t always a positive aspect. The CRHF depends on the optional, but highly suggested, donations from the volunteers to fund their projects throughout the year. Without the volunteers, the CRHF would be unable to be as active in the community. Interestingly, while Leah and the CRHF do not necessarily view organizational dependency on civic engagers as problematic, some interviewees described a reliance on foreign aid to be a consequence of “harmful” civic engagement projects.
Why is it so Difficult to See Harm?

Among my interviewees, there was a range of an ability to recognize harm. Jessica recognized the potential for harm immediately, Erica acknowledged the harm slowly, over the course of the interview, and Leah remained unable to see any potential harm. I was curious – what makes it so difficult to see harm? Since Michelle is so aware of the effects of her physical presence and had few expectations from her civic engagement projects, I asked what she attributed as the primary reasons other people struggled to have the same level of awareness.

Frances: What do you think makes it so difficult for some people to see the potential that their civic engagement project could potentially cause some harm?

Michelle: Because they want to go save people. I feel like I'd be very disheartened if I later figured out that I caused harm, as, I'm assuming, the vast majority of people would be. But perhaps that's less so for people who don't really expect to make a difference or think, "A difference is great," but don't assume it will occur. Perhaps then, that would be less hurtful. But I don't know, I mean that's just part of the game (emphasis added).

Michelle notes how difficult it is to step back and take a critical look at the work you have done because the experience becomes part of your identity, and it is discouraging to come to terms with the possibility that your best efforts may have resulted in harm. This perspective is similar to the humanitarian aid worker’s justification to preserve their “self worth and accomplishment.” Since I have worked in Costa Rica for two of my past three summers at Duke, my civic engagement projects have become part of my identity. People will ask my opinion if they want to volunteer in Costa Rica, or are planning on traveling there and need to know what to bring or where to go. Working with the CRHF helped develop my ever-changing frame for making sense of the world and helped me learn a lot about myself through the process. If someone
were to give me a call, and tell me that the projects I helped run in Costa Rica caused major problems for the community and for the CRHF, I would be devastated. Not only would those summers feel like a waste, but that part of myself that was developed there would feel false. It is certainly more comfortable (albeit not advisable) to continue thinking that your project was an incredible success, and not risk the potential disheartenment of seeing harm.

Michelle also raises an interesting point that a civic engager’s ability to critically analyze their experience is dependent upon their original motives. If a civic engager goes into the field and only considers one potential outcome, they might be less able to recognize a different outcome. For example, when Mary conducted her project, she was so certain she was going to uncover the true community needs and make a difference, but she was unable to see how her presence was disrupting the social dynamic of La Carpio.

Jessica also commented on how uncomfortable it is to criticize your own project, and the guilt she felt when she presented her documentary about her civic engagement project.

Jessica: *It is really hard to kind of face the fact that you yourself are criticizing yourself. I have always been proud of myself, but then you start reconsidering. You feel guilty, and at the same time you don’t want to admit it, you know?*

Frances: *What do you feel guilty about it?*

Jessica: *I made a documentary out of DukeEngage in Cairo, in Egypt, and I presented the documentary at an international conference a few weeks ago. And the people in the audience were in awe and were so moved. And I was sitting there wondering, “Why am I not feeling proud?” I did not know how to feel. Should I really be proud of this? Or should I feel guilty about saying, “Oh, I helped these little refugee kids”? They are still refugees, and they are still not going to school. After we left, they are still going to be wandering around the streets... But we spent at least $5,000 each. Maybe that money from the free trip could have been used in a different way. What help did I really provide?*
Jessica expresses concern with feeling guilty for her civic engagement project and undeserving of the attention and admiration it received from her audience, when the situation in Cairo has not changed; the refugees continued to live in the same conditions after Jessica left. Why did Jessica feel uncomfortable feeling guilty about her civic engagement project? Why did she feel as though she should feel proud? Isn’t that uncomfortable feeling just a symptom of the changing assumptions? And isn’t that self discovery one of the goals of DukeEngage? Michelle expressed concern with the similar point when she referenced ‘playing the game.’ It appears as though the structure of civic engagement at Duke causes students to feel as though they need to be proud of the work that they accomplish, and in turn, prevents them from acknowledging any potential guilt and seeing the harm that might have resulted from their summer. If students intend to use their civic engagement project as a selling point, as a way to make their resumes more appealing to future employers, for example, it would be detrimental to recognize that their project might have had some negative effects. I do not intend to attribute all the blame to the individual. It is also advantageous to Duke to have students present outstanding projects. They want students to apply to receive DukeEngage, justifying their financial backing from the Gates Foundation and Duke Endowment.

**Institutional Measures to Reduce Harm: Accountability**

If it is difficult for individuals to see the harm that their projects are causing, what can be done on the university level to prevent projects from causing harm? How effective are they? Additionally, how has the issue of harm been confronted and addressed in the humanitarian aid community, and how could those lessons learned apply to civic engagement? Is it possible to ensure that the work being done is having a positive effect?
The subject of harm is far from foreign from the humanitarian aid community. Humanitarian action is imbued with an essential paradox: humanitarian aid can prolong the very suffering it is trying to alleviate. Because humanitarian organizations provide services based on need and do not discriminate based on lines of political division, humanitarian aid inherently prolongs the conflicts because they provide care to anyone regardless of what side they support, and could very well rehabilitate a soldier to go back on the battlefield. One of the least ambiguous cases where humanitarian aid caused harm occurred when refugee camps in Zaire established to shelter those displaced from the genocide in Rwanda served as a base for organized violence (Terry, 2). The response to cases where humanitarian aid prolonged conflicts caused the humanitarian aid community to consider the best ways to prevent humanitarian aid from resulting in harm, and hold them accountable.

How do you ensure that humanitarian aid is accomplishing its intended goals? In an article published in the Humanitarian Policy Network, John Mitchell, Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) Coordinator, highlights the problem: while, "everyone agrees that being held to account will enhance the responsibility of individuals, organizations and states, and in turn, improve the quality of humanitarian action," there is not a consensus on how that should be executed (HPG, Mitchell, 2).

Humanitarian aid organizations are accountable to their donors, the institutions providing funding for the projects, and the recipients of their aid. The humanitarian aid organizations are accountable to both their donors and the recipients. Parallel to humanitarian aid, civic engagers are accountable to DukeEngage and community members. Interestingly, DukeEngage is also accountable to the Gates Foundation. In
order to retain the financial support, they must demonstrate continued achievement, and perform their duties as a grateful grant recipient.

Donors ↔ humanitarian aid organizations → recipients
(Gates Foundation ↔) DukeEngage ↔ civic engagers → community members

However, the issue of accountability becomes complicated when it is contextualized within a power dynamic that often encompasses the humanitarian organizations and the regions they work in. Although one party might be accountable to a second party, if the second party is less powerful, they might not have leverage to ensure that the first party is best representing their concerns. For example, despite the humanitarian organizations’ claim that they are first and foremost accountable to the recipients of aid, the recipients do not have leverage to hold the humanitarian organizations accountable to voicing their concerns. Those community members are most affected when a humanitarian project causes harm. On the other hand, humanitarian organizations are accountable to provide justification for how they are using the donors’ funding, and the donors can hold the humanitarian organizations accountable as they control the funding source. Whereas the donors have leverage to ensure that the humanitarian aid organizations deliver their promises, there the community members are dependent on the integrity of the humanitarian aid organizations to uphold their promise to act in the best interest of the community.

This power relationship echoes that present with DukeEngage. Duke Engage funds students, and expects them to participate in the project, contribute to a blog, conduct a survey on their experience, and take photos for future recruitment. The civic

22 Please see the appendix for a white paper I wrote with Kate Whetten describing the appropriate relations between the students and their project, community based organization, community, and university.
engagers are also expected to remain accountable to the community at their project sites, however with the current system, there is no way for the community members to “check” the power of the civic engagers. Faculty members desiring to incorporated community evaluations of the students were turned down by DukeEngage, which stated that the goals of the program were to create a global learners and consequently hearing the opinions of the community members was not necessary. When Mary left La Carpio, Gail had no way of evaluating her performance to share the negative impacts of her project. (And even if she did, she might be hesitant to provide honest feedback as it might compromise future volunteers from her university, and therefore burn a potential source of funding.)

Currently, there is no system for institutionalized accountability for humanitarian aid or civic engagement, creating an environment where there is more room for creativity and flexibility in the field, but consequently, an increased potential for harm. In order to protect the rights of the recipients of humanitarian aid, many in the humanitarian aid community suggest an institutional standardization approach, a Code of Conduct, to delineate broad criteria to advise and regulate conduct in the field. A Code of Conduct would create universal standards for all humanitarian organizations. But others worry this would limit the adaptability of the organizations in the field. Like civic engagement projects, humanitarian aid is highly dependent on the situation on the ground, with humanitarian aid organizations making quick decisions with the information available.

This sense of accountability can create a culture of justification, placing less emphasis on and incentives for honesty, objective thinking, and critical reflection (qualities necessary to prevent the very harm the accountability measures are trying to protect against.) Since there is such a varied landscape of humanitarian aid organizations, Austen Davis of MSF Holland argues that any regulations placed on
humanitarian aid would have to be vague in order to remain applicable, because, "How do you compare the value of a mission that was successful in reducing mortality rates with one that was successful in restoring human dignity? If there are too many axes of ‘worthy’, then any critic can either condemn or praise every action" (16). Fiona Terry says that although humanitarian aid might be in compliance with the regulations stipulated in a prescribed code of ethical action, like a Code of Conduct, that does not necessarily mean the actions themselves are ethical. “Just as minimum standards of relief assistance are not always possible to attain, attaining minimum standards does not guarantee that aid is humanitarian” (Terry, 4). If guidelines are established, there is the risk that accountability will become a buzzword or become an end in itself as opposed to weighing actions in the field. Once the criteria are met, the work is deemed “ethical” and allowed to continue without questioning.

The same conflict is present in the university setting. Duke is a university founded on research, and consequently has established more extensive evaluative mechanisms. Interestingly, the IRB was not founded until after a research project at the Duke University Medical Center resulted in a poor outcome, and the Office for Human Research Protections deemed that the university’s current evaluative methods were insufficient. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is designed to “ensure the protection of human research subjects by conducting scientific and ethical review of research studies while providing leadership and education for the research community” at the university level (“Institutional Review Board”). The IRB’s purpose is to ensure that the projects remain culturally sensitive and benefit the research participants (“Institutional Review Board”). Right now, only research projects require IRB approval, but as the distinctions between research, civic engagement, and service become increasingly blurred, it is
evident that the potential risks associated with research projects also apply to civic engagement. Simply because a research project is approved by the IRB does not mean it is necessarily conducted in an ethical manner. The entire IRB process seems so bureaucratic, a final hurdle standing between the you and your research, so you say what you need to say to appease the reviewer and receive the official stamp of approval to begin researching. There is the false assumption that as long as the meticulous and tedious IRB protocol is submitted and approved, the project is ethical,

But, ultimately, the information generated by either the Code of Conduct or the IRB does not have any tangible outcome by itself. As Larry Minear, director of the Humanitarianism and War Project at the Feinstein International Famine Center comments:

“The swing of the pendulum from a dearth of thoughtful material to an abundance of it is welcome and overdue. Yet the latter extreme might be as unhelpful to the process of learning and change as was the former. Even the proliferation of so-called lessons learned units is not in and of itself a sign of progress. Since serious learning requires institutional change, such units might better be called “lessons-learning” or “lessons identified” units and viewed as a means to an end rather than ends in themselves” (Terry 232).

Ultimately, instead of serving as a strict duality—yes, this project is ethical, or no, it is not—accountability needs to be applied in the field. Torrente and Stobbaerts of MSF reinforce the notion that: “Accountability is perhaps most significant as an organizational state of mind – a willingness to ask difficult questions about one’s operations, to seek and share the answers, and to learn from the process” (Stobbaerts and Torrente, 6). Just like if a civic engager fills out the application and completes the DukeEngage Academy, then there is the assumption that that student will have a good civic engagement project. That alone is not enough to ensure that a civic engagement project will have a positive outcome. As Bronislaw Malinowski, the father of anthropology, argues, there is no
recipe, no “ethnographer’s magic” that can provide an easy answer or result in a successful project, instead, it is just hard work, and I would add, constant reflection and questioning (6).

Redeeming Qualities

Just as it is important to recognize the harm that civic engagement can cause, it is equally important to acknowledge the benefits it provides. Jessica worked in Cairo with DukeEngage, teaching English to refugee children. When I asked Jessica what she contributed on her civic engagement project, she described her interactions with a particular student who was skeptical and remained unengaged in lessons. Even though Jessica noticed that her English wasn’t as proficient as her other students, this student continually reasserted that the lessons were too easy. Jessica was perplexed by this student, and wanted to find a way to approach her so that she would learn happily, and not reluctantly. Jessica learned that the student came from an affluent family where she was treated like a princess; very different from her current living conditions in Egypt.

This same student wouldn’t eat food at the cafeteria at the school with the other child refugees, so Jessica began going down to the cafeteria with her so they could all eat together. At first, the student refused, saying she couldn’t eat the food from the cafeteria because it was so much worse than the food she used to eat in her home country. Jessica described the lunch situation:

Jessica: “Everybody would be eating, she would be sitting there, and she would be starving. And then, I said, ‘It’s time to eat. I’m so hungry.’ Then I would ask, ‘Can you please bring me food as well?’ The first day, she brought me food, she didn’t bring her food. So, she brought one plate. Then, second day, and then several days, including my professor, a doctor, he joined us, too. Some two or three more Duke students joined us, too, and she started eating from the cafeteria, too. This went on for a while, until things started to change. She started saying, ‘Teacher, you eat this and I will eat that.’ It’s just like she forgot that she was once a princess.
She realized that she did not have to hold her ‘dignity’ or the high status of being a princess back home any more because we’re all the same. So, I felt, somehow, that helped her. But, I’m not sure if it’s going to last, but at least, the two months there, I felt she really changed a lot, her personality changed a lot.”

Just as Jessica came to the realization that not all poor people have always been poor, she was able to create constructive change. Jessica was able to leverage her position of power in a positive way, and convince the girl that if Jessica ate the food, then she should too.

In addition to some positive contributions to the community, the civic engagers learned from the experience, which should not be belittled as insignificant. Although Erica had a difficult time recognizing how her project influenced the community, she points out that the civic engagers still change themselves: “I think people one at a time do civic engagement, and if not, they may not change somebody else, but at least they're changing themselves. And, I think that's still a step toward change overall.” Even Leah, who had a difficult time conceptualizing the potential that her project created harm, felt she learned from the experience. Although she did not originally set out with any predetermined goals, she gained an awareness she did not possess before her week in Belize, and is now conceptualizing her world in a different manner.

**Leah:** I’d never gone to a third world country. And it was really interesting because it’s a resort town, so it’s like some place I’d go with my family, so it’s really nice. And then it was contrasted by this slum, which was where the slum was. Just seeing that contrast was really striking because I’ve been fortunate to go on many nice vacations, so you think about, well, the people who clean my room, like, they must just live somewhere else.

She is also connecting the experience back to her life at Duke.

**When I came back to Duke I felt very wasteful. I felt very guilty piling my plate high with food at the Marketplace, and then dumping it in the trash. And then the pretentious attitude of a lot of people, even myself sometimes,**
makes you realize that having a test on Friday is not that bad compared to what other people have to go through.

This consciousness raising is an important outcome of the program. Changing one’s assumptions is a process. It doesn’t happen overnight. If it was not possible to change one’s assumptions, I would not be writing this thesis. A crucial component of changing this structure is the uncomfortable to take a critical look at the work that you are doing, and acknowledge both the good and the bad of the project. Recognize your place in the external power dynamics that affect every interaction. Illich states, “I do not think that real conversion is possible unless one says: ‘I was mistaken, I was wrong. I let myself be led into the organization…by my deep rooted pride, belief in my superiority, my conviction that I had something to give’” (Illich, 2). As Jessica and Michelle acknowledge, it is undoubtedly an uncomfortable process to consider the possibility that your project was not as perfect as you would like to think, or as you would like to portray in that poster display or international documentary screening. But that very sense of frustration can be extremely productive. Illich describes this frustration as a realization that finally, the student has come to a new awareness “that even North Americans can receive the gift of hospitality without the slightest ability to pay for it; the awareness that for some gifts one cannot even say ‘thank you’” (Illich, 3).

Whereas Illich sees this realization as a finite end in and of itself, Brazilian theorist Paolo Freire contextualizes this sentiment of discomfort as a necessary state in a cycle of praxis. A dialectic discourse between theory and practice, Freire explains praxis as the process by which action is informed by theory, and theory is informed by action. This combination of “reflection and action upon the world” is necessary in order to highlight assumptions and create change (Freire, 36). He describes this process of assumption changing as a cycle: The first step is seeing – individuals must be exposed to
an injustice. Secondly, they must think and reflect over why that might bother them, why
they feel uncomfortable. Next, they must translate that thought into action, applying that
thought back to their own lives and changing the way they conceptualize their identities
and their work. Friere’s praxis helps demonstrate that there is the potential for civic
engagement projects to cause harm, and there is the potential that they will have a
positive impact, but above all, civic engagement is a process (126). Without acting and
interacting, students and community members cannot even begin Friere’s cycle of praxis,
preventing a more effective way of conceptualizing the power relationships experienced
in the field. Freire helps explain civic engagement as pedagogy; not in terms of harm or
good, but instead of a process of change - changing assumptions, changing theory, and
changing practice.
Conclusion

“To such a position we can only respond: try.”
Sherry Ortner

In an address to college students before they conducted a civic engagement project in Mexico, Ivan Illich says to hell with it: He believes all work is conducted in a paternalistic nature that only compounds the existing power inequality defining the relationship between the developed and developing countries. He believes university students have an “abyssmal lack of intuitive delicacy” because they grew up in a particular background and, as such, were preconditioned to be a “vacationing salesman for the middle class ‘American Way of Life,’” thinking that “any true American must share God’s blessing with his poor fellow man” (Illich, 3). He believes Americans have this idea that “they have something to give, and at all times they may, can, and should give it” (Illich, 3). And consequently, he believes that university students should stop volunteering in low income countries.

And I agree that civic engagement cannot continue as is. Civic engagement can cause harm and there are individuals who approach their projects with paternalistic motives and the assumption that they have all the answers. There are students who use civic engagement to make their resume more attractive, and are not able to see the potential implications of their actions.

But, what Illich does not account for is the ability for the individuals to change. As Friere, and all of my interviewees demonstrate, identity is a constantly evolving facet. In order to be a good civic engager, you must engage: listen to the community, feel uncomfortable, explore why, and connect that discovery back to your reality and your perceptions of others. It is an active process. Change does not happen on its own. Often the process of realizing assumptions feels extremely awkward, an uncomfortable
symptom of growth – like suddenly noticing the skin you we wearing no longer fits, so you shed it and develop a new one.

When I first went to Costa Rica and began getting involved in civic engagement, my mentality was not unlike that of many of my interviewees. I wanted to participate in the Service Opportunities in Leadership program because I was attracted to having the named and competitive applied leadership program on my resume. I was fascinated and repulsed by the poverty in La Carpio, and, like Erica, thought I could make the most difference in the area with the most need. Rereading that initial journal entry describing my introduction to the river was extremely embarrassing, but the very fact that I could see my naïveté is testament to how I, as an individual, am growing. The more time I spent in La Carpio, the more layers I realized there were in the metaphorical onion and the easier it became to see the complexities of the social landscape. The more I learn, the more I realize there is to learn. I don’t have all the answers (can you ever?) but I’m learning. Even writing this thesis has caused me to process my own experiences in La Carpio.

I am receptive to the actions of others, and have the support from mentors who have made me consider the implications of my actions, and the risks of my work in the field. They ask me the tough questions I have not broached myself, challenge me to think in a different way, and help me process my experiences. Diane Nelson, my faculty mentor for my first summer in Costa Rica, and now my principle advisor on this thesis, always noted when I made an assumption, for example, homogenizing the interests of the individuals living in La Carpio, or conceptualizing my role as the knight(ess) in shining armor. And even though I might have agreed with her right off the bat, attributing the insensitive comment to inarticulate diction, I always found myself returning to those
points, and making a mental note. Kate Whetten, my professor for my first public health course, always helped me consider aspects of cultural sensitivity that I had not previously considered. Gail Nystrom helped me process my experience in La Carpio. She told me about the history and social fabric of La Carpio on our rides in to work every morning, adding layers and texture to my understanding of the community and informing my comprehension not only of the faces and stories of La Carpio, but where I fit in that landscape. She helped me gain perspective when I felt betrayed after Marlene tried to use me for money and helped me stay involved with the CRHF after I left Costa Rica.

The only way to grow is through trying, a red herring of sorts. The power dynamics can remain invisible if one just stays in a little bubble at Duke and never treads elsewhere. That is not the reality of this increasingly globalized world. If done correctly, through brainstorming culturally sensitive solutions to community defined problems, change can happen, both in the individual and through the organizations those individuals work with in the field. Had I not worked through that initial naïve stage where my perceptions of “the other” were formed by the institutional and historical relationships between the developed and developing regions, I would still be as naïve as I was when I first went to La Carpio. My assumptions would never be challenged, and, worse, I would not know they existed. In order to effectively create that change, it is imperative to recognize the implications of one’s actions and the potential for harm, not only how a civic engager might perceive his or her role, but how he or she is perceived by others. I believe that is only through that reflection that an individual can be an effective civic engager, and have the possibility of producing change, and doing good work.

And just as I changed, so did the community. Marlene asked me for money, I denied her request, but we stayed close. Just as I learned how I was being interpreted by
others, she also learned that not all gringos mean money. Many of the kids I worked with down at the river now attend school. One of Jessica’s students in Cairo learned that it is okay to accept the food that the school provided because Jessica ate it too.

This is far from a perfect world. There is injustice. There is suffering. An earthquake just demolished any existing infrastructure in the most densely populated regions of Haiti. Zimbabwe is consumed with political turmoil, severely impacting its citizens. Obesity and obesity-related diseases affect far more families than they should. It is unethical for me to sit back in my comfortable position as an American student at Duke and do nothing, rationalizing that the risk for harm is too great. If I sit at home, those conditions remain the same. Just because aid to Rwandan refugees had negative effects does not mean that all humanitarian aid organizations should stop providing aid in Haiti.

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner confronts a similar critique when describing ethnography. She argues that the structural power differences do not mean all projects cause harm and the only way to create positive change is by doing something.

“The political economists, moreover, tend to situation themselves more on the ship of (capitalist) history than on the shore. They say in effect that we can never know what the other system, in its unique, “traditional,” aspects, really looked like anyway. By realizing that much of what we see as tradition is in fact a response to Western impact, so the argument goes, we not only get a more accurate picture of what is going on, but we acknowledge at the same time the pernicious effects of our own system upon others. Such a view is also present, but in modes of anger and/or despair rather than pragmatism, in a number of recent works that question philosophically whether we can ever truly know the ‘other’…

To such a position we can only respond: try” (143).

I agree with Ortner—there is a definite value in trying civic engagement. As Fiona Terry argues, it is impossible to completely reduce the possibility of inadvertently causing
harm—that is not sufficient rationale to stop civic engagement. Without experiencing a different reality, it is impossible for anyone to experience the questioning that Friere considers so important in identity changing. It is impossible to grow. The only way to ensure that the unequal power dynamics remain unexamined is by preventing the younger generation from experiencing something different. Duke’s mission is to educate its students and make them citizens of the world, and they are accomplishing that goal. Every one of my interviewees expressed that they gained something from participating in a civic engagement project.

But at what cost? Is it ethical to use a summer civic engagement project as a way of improving the minds of the university’s students, even if it compromises the wellbeing of community? Is it worth the potential negative community impact to allow students to “try it out” and experience that transformation of becoming a global citizen? Just because I am arguing that humanitarian aid and civic engagement should continue doesn’t mean that all aid is good, or, conversely, that civic engagement will uphold unequal power dynamic between high and low income countries.

While I see great value in producing global citizens and recognize it is impossible to completely prevent the possibility for harm, it is irresponsible for Duke, or any university, to allow civic engagement to continue as is. As Mary demonstrated, creating positive change can be a painstakingly slow process, but harm can happen in no time at all – like her benevolent and seemingly inconsequential donation.

It is irresponsible, unethical, and a violation of its position of power for Duke University to continue sending students into the field who do not understand the potential consequences of their presence in the community. It may not always be able to foresee all potential harm, but that does not justify sending students into the field, as Illich would
say, doomed to fail—they need to have their eyes open to the possibility that their projects could cause harm. My main concern with civic engagement is that students are not aware of the harm that they, according to Terry, will cause. That needs to be changed. Entering into a community is not something that can be taken lightly. So the question becomes, how can civic engagement be changed so that it provides the most benefit for both the civic engagers and the community? How do you cause the civic engagers to consider the implications of their actions?

My answer might seem counterintuitive: Lower the expectations.

It is okay for Duke students to have a “good” civic engagement project. It doesn’t have to be “life changing,” provide the “defining experience of my Duke career,” or be “a transformative experience.” Sometimes, good is good enough. I realize this may seem like the easy way out, but I assure you it is not.

Right now, with DukeEngage and civic engagement being marketed and interpreted as this bright shiny ne’er-do-harm transformational experience, the high stakes are concealed. Duke students know how to perform: what they “should” feel, what they “should” do, and what they “should” accomplish, and they definitely know how to package their summer in a way where that shows. With all the pressure to represent a civic engagement project as a huge accomplishment, it becomes socially unacceptable and disadvantageous to acknowledge that “impact” on the community might not have been entirely positive. Students compartmentalize their concerns with their projects, choosing to present their accomplishments, but not necessarily recognizing the failures or sites for harm. But by establishing unattainable standards of perfection, expressing
doubts or concerns about a project makes the student seem like a failure, and the discussion of harm becomes taboo. So students just stop thinking about it—the most dangerous assumption of all.

It is necessary to change the perception of harm so it is not something that is structurally repressed, but rather something that is visible, discussed, evaluated. By lowering the expectations from “life changing” to “good,” it enables civic engagers to question and acknowledge feeling uncomfortable. It brings the focus back to listening and learning, and through that changing. They can be more honest with themselves, and the organizations, which might result in greater benefit for everyone involved. Fiona Terry comes to the same conclusion, arguing: “Humanitarian action will never attain perfection: rather than aiming for a first-best world, we must aim for a second best world and adjust to that accordingly” (245). This method of thinking and reforming personal identities is part of a larger process of linking the field to the home, constantly drawing comparisons and connections between the foreign and the familiar, and making the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

Doing good work and creating the change that the Millennial generation so desires takes more than spending a summer on a civic engagement project. It requires time, dedication, and sacrifice to build the trusting relationships necessary to create sustainable change, like Gail with the CRHF. As Bertolt Bretch sings, "Hay hombres que luchan un día y son buenos. Hay otros que luchan un año y son mejores. Hay quienes luchan muchos años y son muy buenos. Pero hay los que luchan toda la vida: esos son los imprescindibles." But that process needs to start somewhere. It is unrealistic to expect

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23 Translation: There are men who fight one day and are good; others fight for a year and are better. There are some who fight several years and are very good. But there are those who fight all their lives. Those are the essentials/indispensable.
a student who has never traveled outside of his or her comfort zone to dedicate his or her life to combating inequality.

We are students. We don’t have it all figured out yet, but we are in the process of getting there. We are learning who we are, and where our piece fits in this puzzle of a world. And how else can we figure that out except by trying? As Michelle says:

This is the cheesiest answer I can ever imagine. I’m thinking of getting this quote by Harvey Milk tattooed on my foot: “Hope will never be silent.” I think that’s relevant in the sense that if you lose hope, and you start being silent, it’s like you might as well be dead.

I think I’ll always be conflicted to a certain extent about doing service. I always talk about being conflicted about doing the soup kitchen thing, but I’m still doing it because... well, I don’t really know why I’m still doing it. I have a lot of qualms about Duke Engage, but I still do stuff with them.

[...]

I mean, I’m 21. How am I supposed to have this figured out? I think my general attempted approach to things is you stumble around, figure out a few things, hope to get a little further along the path, but ultimately you’ll always be stumbling along. What I mean is, there’s no reason to stop doing stuff. It goes back to the whole "Hope is never silent" thing.
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Appendix

White Paper written with Kate Whetten:

**Student Engagement with Communities and Organizations**

As resources and initiatives increase for student participation and engagement in research and service projects all over the world, we would like to ensure that students are adequately prepared to interact in a culturally competent manner with people, organizations and communities with fewer resources. We realize that differential power dynamics factor into relationships between students from universities in the United States and community members in less-wealthy areas of the world. We hope that by recognizing and responding to the imbalances we can generate respect and collaboration so that students and community members can comfortably work together. We have created a list of guidelines to help negotiate these relationships.

**Student – Project Relations**

- To provide the most effective and helpful service, students should not attempt projects for which they do not have the necessary background information, skills, and experience
  - Comprehensive background research should be a prerequisite for traveling, including history, demographics, and cultural norms
- To build trust and lasting relationships and to foster understanding with the community they are working in, students should spend an appropriate amount of time with the organization. Ten weeks is the recommended minimum duration, but can be adjusted depending on the project.
- To ensure sustainability, cost feasibility for project continuation should be considered from the start of a project
- Students should be prepared to adapt programs and projects as they go, to better meet the needs and/or limitations of the research/service environment

**Student – Community Based Organization Relations**

- Students should have prior agreement from the organizations/communities with which they are working
- Students should ensure that the projects are necessary, beneficial and address the needs of the groups with which they are working
- Students should consider the characteristics, needs, strengths and limitations of the organization or community in which they will be working when designing projects
- Students should be open to dialogue about solutions with a community or organization, without having a preconceived “answer”
- Students should be prepared to transfer skills to partner organizations

**Student – Community Relations**

- To bolster relationships and expand cultural competency, students should make efforts to get to know community members outside of their project
• Realistic goals and timelines should be researched and planned based on the time period, project type, location, and community.
• Students working with community organizations should include community input in student projects

Student – University Relations
• Universities should give priority to research/service projects that work with existing research/service projects to promote stability, continuity, and collaboration
• Community sustainability should be a priority and begin at the earliest stages when new programs/projects are conceived
• Resources should be allocated based on the option which will serve the most vulnerable groups and have the greatest impact.

Recommendations
• Further discussions should continue on the development of a “bill of rights” for community organizations partnering with Duke students
• There should be further development of an academic pathway/support to provide students with a sufficient background for particular projects of interest, as well as an experienced faculty mentor.

We believe that these recommendations will serve to solidify positive relations between students, communities, local organizations, and the university. While students’ primary objective in these activities is generally to learn new knowledge and skills for future work, an adequate working relationship with others is important. The recommendations should foster an environment of respect, in which no party to the project loses its unique role but the ultimate goal of improving the lives of local community members is upheld.
Breaking Taboo

Professor Whetten’s Global Health Ethics class had just watched “Born into Brothels,” a documentary following the journey of an American student who traveled to India who worked with the children of Indian sex workers. The class considered this to be the ideal civic engagement project, commending the student’s dedication to live there for an extended period of time, working in close proximity with the women, and learning the language. The class, and I, were shocked when Professor Whetten revealed that this project did not have the intended effects. She explained that after the American student left, the women who were included in the documentary were ostracized, as sex work is seen as a dishonorable and shameful profession. The sex workers lost business, and the children returned home to earn money to help compensate for their mother’s reduced market. The students slowly came to the realization that the student’s seemingly ideal project resulted in harm, and referenced the documentary for the following two classes I attended. In her interview Jessica, explained how the discussion in Professor Whetten’s course made her reconsider her own actions in the field, and question the benevolence of the women who ran her school in Tibet.

This type of structured assumption questioning is exactly what is needed to break bring harm into the forefront of the discussion surrounding civic engagement. In order to break the taboo of harm, and call into question the notion of “good works,” there needs to be more of this structured guided discussion, questioning, and reflection as a part of academic and campus culture. These structured discussions should be incorporated into both the application process, and pre-departure training for DukeEngage. By acknowledging the potential for harm in a structured environment, it is possible to expand
the discourse of harm which might cause the civic engagers to more closely consider the implications of their actions in the field.

Another point to break the taboo about harm is in the application process for programs like DukeEngage. Currently, in an effort to prepare students for their civic engagement projects, DukeEngage requires grant recipients to participate in a three-day DukeEngage Academy, before they embark on their civic engagement project. The purpose of the DukeEngage Academy is to encourage the students to think about the ethical implications of their actions, and conduct exercises on cultural sensitivity (DukeEngage: The Academy). But by and large, the DukeEngage Academy is viewed as a waste of time and not an effective means of preparing students. The students are noticeably dis-engaged from the entire workshop. Conversations lag, and students seem unenthused. Not one of my interviewees considered the DukeEngage Academy an effective means to prepare students for the ethical dilemmas they could confront in the field. At this point, the students only need to show up in order to receive their checks.

In order to begin this discussion sooner, the DukeEngage Academy should be part of the application, where an individual’s participation and answers contributed to the evaluation of their application. This would ensure that the students would remain interested and participate. This new training program should incorporate more student involvement to lead discussions of best practices, but also failures in the field. Being open about the failures and the harm caused in the field will help the new applicants realize the responsibility associated with going into the field. During the time where DukeEngage Academy is normally held, there should be program specific workshop to build skills and discuss cultural competency.
Another way to expand the discourse about harm and facilitate the connection between a summer civic engagement project and one’s involvement at Duke is to increase the length and have the students partner with organizations in the Research Triangle Park, then intern at their international project sites over the course of the summer, and then connect their experience back to Duke through a local project during the Fall. The same project mentors would be used, and so past program participants would also serve as mentors and cultural brokers for new program applicants. For a more extensive review of this program, reference the appendix.

I think students are ready for this change, and will be receptive. New classes that address the ethics of civic engagement are being created to address these issues—Public Policy offers the Politics and Ethics of Civic Engagement, and Latin American Studies offers Applying Knowledge of Latin America and the Caribbean: Learning to Connect the World. The process of changing assumptions and acknowledging harm is a difficult but rewarding process, and incredibly necessary for civic engagement to continue.

With its growing popularity on campus, it is increasingly important to recognize that civic engagement functions within a field that carries a history of unequal power relations and exploitation. There is always the potential that, as Illich argues, civic engagement will just compound that power relationship and continue to oppress the individuals in the developing countries. But that is not always the case. Sometimes the interaction between civic engagers and the community members can result in a constructive changing of assumptions for both parties, and the two can work constructively to create change that the civic engagers and community members desire. While this assumption changing is extremely important, it is necessary to acknowledge that the potential for a negative outcome, and that needs to be addressed.
Good work is exactly what we need to do. But we don’t just need to work on others, we need to do work on ourselves, and the structure of civic engagement. We need to work to understand our own assumptions, and the assumptions of others. And we need to work to ensure that civic engagement is “good.”
DGHI - TGHC Fellows Program

Objectives: There are few opportunities for undergraduate students to see how their academic understanding of global health translates to a practical work environment. The DGHI - TGHC Fellows Program will fill that void by integrating distinguished students into organizations in the Triangle Global Health Consortium (TGHC) through a year-long program designed to create meaningful deliverables founded on practical experience and collaboration. The program will also help substantiate the relationship between the universities and organizations in the Triangle Global Health Consortium, and support the Consortium’s mission statement to “inspire and mentor future researchers.”

Program Sequence, Goals and TGHC Commitment:

Pre-Program: TGHC organizations submit a brier proposal (used for student placement) proposing a summer project site and outlining how they will incorporate an intern. Students apply for the program.

Benefits to Students:
- Students would receive practical experience working with an organization, learn about a potential career path, gain international experience
- Foster a year-long relationship with an organization and gain topical focus and depth

Benefits to Organizations:
- Increased collaboration with universities involved in the TGHC
- Establish relationships with highly qualified and interested students
- Consistent student involvement and sustainable student projects
- Provide an extra set of well-prepared hands to contribute to project sites

**Logistics:**

- **Student Criteria** – Students from Duke, UNC, and NC State will be eligible to apply for the program. Six students will be selected based on demonstrated commitment and motivation for global health, past fieldwork experience, and appropriate pairing with a TGHC project.
- **Organization Criteria** – Organizations will be selected based on demonstrated interest and commitment to mentoring.
- **Funding** – Participation in the program does not guarantee funding. Students will be guided to locate and apply for grants at their own universities to finance the summer component.
- **Timeline** – This is the ideal program sequence, however the program could be implemented in stages based on organization and university readiness.