

Merrimack College's Haiti Service Learning Initiative

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Abstract

Merrimack College's Haiti Service Learning Initiative (MCHSLI) is a partnership between Project Medishare for Haiti and Merrimack College that benefits both the Haitian population and our students. The Haitian people receive much needed medical, developmental and engineering related assistance. The students receive a memorable and rewarding experience and the opportunity to nurture a deeper understanding of relevant discipline specific content through personal connections to the project and the people they meet in Haiti.

The initiative began with discussions among faculty and staff members across the college after a talk by Project Medishare Co-Founder Dr. Art Fournier in Fall 2010. Project Medishare for Haiti is a medical non-profit organization that works together with the people of Haiti to provide rural communities with quality healthcare and development services. Our efforts in Haiti are divided into three phases:

- Phase 1. Study and observe the problems facing the Haitian people.
- Phase 2. Develop projects and programs that are able to answer these needs in an ongoing, sustainable manner.
- Phase 3. Implement these programs and projects with the help of Project Medishare and the Haitian people.

Phase 1 of the initiative occurred in the summer of 2011, when faculty and staff from civil engineering, campus ministry, and health sciences participated in a fact finding trip to Haiti. The goal of this initial trip was to learn more about the problems facing the Haitian people and to identify specific needs that our students can address.

The outcome of this initial trip was a budding relationship with Project Medishare and the development of two projects that address specific needs of the Haitian population. The aims of these projects are to:

- Provide the town of Casse (see Figure 1) with clean water. Currently the residents of Casse are required to draw the majority of their water from the local, cholera-contaminated river (see Figure 2).
- Provide health care for those who suffer from work related injuries. Currently Haitians who suffer an injury while working have no access to this type of health care and risk losing their livelihood.

We are currently in Phase 2 of our initiative and our first trip to Haiti with students is planned for the first week of June 2012. The goal of our June trip is to gather the necessary technical information so that our teams can achieve the specific aims of each project. We are currently preparing four students for this trip. Two civil engineering and two athletic training students were selected through an application and interview process. We meet with these students once a month in a large group to coordinate fundraising and to prepare them for the challenges of working in a developing country and for facing poverty. In addition, we meet once or twice a month in discipline specific groups to prepare for our specific projects.

MCHSLI has developed into a multidisciplinary team of faculty and staff from the departments of civil engineering, athletic training, and campus ministry. The importance of representation from civil engineering and athletic training is self evident from the projects we have chosen; however the importance of campus ministry is equally important for the success of the initiative. Campus ministry will lead our team in daily reflection while in Haiti to help foster deeper learning and to help students adjust to conditions in Haiti.

MCHSLI has helped develop multidisciplinary relationships beyond the three core departments to include students and faculty from chemistry and biology. Chemistry students, under the direction of a faculty mentor, are currently

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developing a field kit to test for cholera in the water. A biology faculty member is obtaining the protein excreted by cholera to ensure that the test kit is an effective tool before our trip in June.

We plan to begin Phase 3 (i.e. implementation) of these programs in 2013. As we continue to develop this service learning initiative, we hope to find new ways that we can collaborate with other departments and institutions to help the people of Haiti and to provide valuable service learning opportunities for our students.



Figure 1: The town of Casse



Figure 2: The Thomond River. Approximately 0.25 mi west of Casse

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