

Making sure “helping doesn’t hurt”

Ensuring safe care and ethical learning in global health volunteer experiences is a priority

By: the IUI Working Group on Global Health Volunteerism

The problem:

Global health volunteer experiences, if not well designed, may have unintended negative consequences and fail to improve the well-being and health of host communities. There is an urgent international need to address this issue as pre-professional and professional students seek out or are actively recruited to participate in global health volunteer experiences.

Students seek these opportunities to gain experience and to address gaps in health care due to a range of systemic issues. Quality programs require intensive forethought, management, and attention to local community dynamics as well as volunteer preparation. Frequently, patients and host communities are exposed to untrained health workers that frequently do not speak the local language, lack requisite cultural knowledge necessary for offering culturally appropriate care and provide casual labor in short term clinics that fail to offer sustainable care that host communities need to see substantial gains in community health and well-being.

Background

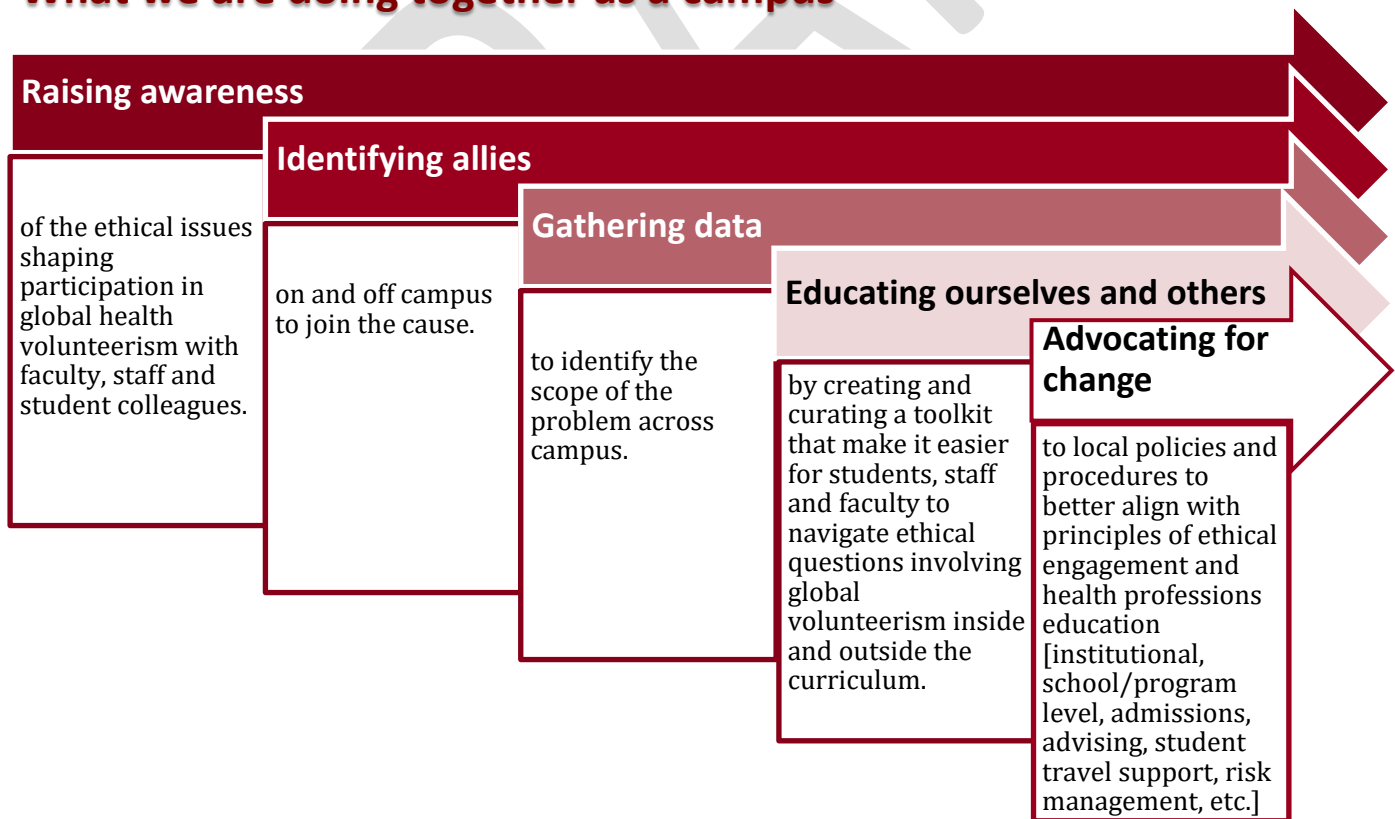
The majority of students that participate in these experiences come from the U.S., Canada and Europe, and disparities in power between students and host communities can cause unintended, negative consequences for the host communities. Student participation in international experiences is on the rise. In 2015-16, more than 325,000 U.S. students studied abroad. Of these, 23,125 participated in a volunteer, non-credit bearing or internship experience [Open Doors, 2017]. These numbers capture only a fraction of the student traffic in the international tourism and volunteer market. In total, international tourism and volunteer sector generates more than \$173 billion in revenues per year. [Hartman & Chaire, 2014].

While still a fraction of the total, the student volunteer and voluntourism market is fast growing and valued at more than \$2 billion. Student participation in global health volunteer programs is an important portion of this market; however, accurate estimates of the number of students involved are difficult to determine. For example, we do not know how many students participate in global health programs through mission trips and programs sponsored by faith-based groups. Such programs are attractive to students drawn to the helping and health professions. Students are motivated to participate by a range of factors including their desires to help and to gain hands-on experience. Despite their good intentions, many are also motivated by the perception that through participation they will become more attractive candidates for admission to highly competitive health professions programs and for positions in their professions. This selling point is part of the marketing strategy of this growing industry, populated by both exemplary and predatory organizations, which have emerged to sell these experiences to students and professionals. Without proper vetting, it can be difficult for students and faculty sponsors to discern legitimate experiences and organizations from those that may cause harm. Faith-based groups working directly in communities are not immune from the need for scrutiny in this problem, as they also contribute to its complexity and scope. **As a leading U.S. health sciences campus, IUI is committed to improving the well-being of people locally and abroad. Adequately preparing students for global health volunteerism is an essential part of our mandate.**

Why this issue matters at IUI:

1. Community engagement is a core institutional value at IUI. Reducing risks and harm to communities that host our students, staff and faculty is an integral part of our commitment as a health sciences campus and as one dedicated to improving the health and well-being of all people.
2. As a nationally and internationally recognized leader in academic-community engagement, IUI can serve as a vanguard among higher education institutions working with partners to address this critical issue comprehensively.
3. Modelling ethical principles and intercultural learning are essential to the general education of our students and are foundational elements of health professions education. Well-designed educational experiences that incorporate ethical principles support appropriate and vital "teachable moments" for students who want to excel as health professionals in multicultural settings.
4. Significant student, community and institutional resources are invested in global engagement at IUI. We have a responsibility to ensure that learning opportunities have a positive impact on students and the communities that host them whether domestically or abroad.
5. Working collaboratively with responsible intermediary organizations, local NGOs and host communities, students will have more powerful global health learning experiences intended to improve the health of in host communities.

What we are doing together as a campus



Who we are:

The IUI Ethics on Global Health Volunteerism Working Group is a coalition of interested 25+ students, faculty, staff, administrators and community organizations committed to strengthening the ethical and humane use of volunteerism, service learning and global health experiences to support the health and well-being of host communities, to strengthen health systems and to facilitate student learning.

Convening Offices:

IUI Office of International Affairs

IUI Center for Service and Learning

Office of Medical Service Learning, IU School of Medicine

If interested in joining this effort, please contact *Stephanie Leslie, Office of International Affairs* sleslie@iu.edu or *Dr. Mary Price, Center for Service and Learning*, price6@iu.edu.

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