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EDUCATION, HURRICANES, AND BANANAS:

Studying Abroad in Honduras

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STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Daphne Fauber is a junior at Purdue University majoring in Engineering Technology Teacher Education with an Integrated STEM concentration. She is also receiving minors in Biological Sciences, Design & Innovation, Biotechnology, Computer Information Technology, and Global Studies. In addition to her academic studies, Daphne is the president of National Technology Engineering Education Collegiate Association Board as well as the local Technology Engineering Education Collegiate Association Chapter. She also participates in Science Olympiad, Purdue FIRST Programs, the *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research*, and the Purdue Student Education Council.

INTRODUCTION

For the past 15 years, students from Purdue University have been traveling to Honduras for a social justice–aligned educational experience designed for students interested in teacher education. Dr. JoAnn Phillion, a professor of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education, created this study abroad with the goals of broadening student horizons and raising awareness of educational issues both internationally and in the United States as two of the key foci. The objective was not for students to be exposed only to teaching, but to participate in a mutually beneficial educational experience and develop an understanding of how oppression, education, and colonization work together to affect the way people think about developing countries. Additionally, the objective was to consider how the aforementioned factors relate to education globally. The purpose of this article is to reflect on Dr. Phillion’s Study Abroad program as well as provide a portrait of Honduran schools. While reading, set aside any preconceived notions of a “third world” or “developing” country just as Dr. Phillion asked her

students to do before the trip began, and think about not only what the current state of Honduras is, but how it got there and what the future may hold.

DESCRIPTION

In order to best understand the context of the Honduras Study Abroad program, it is important to get a snapshot of the program itself, Honduran history, and the schools we visited. The Honduras Study Abroad program is a 17-day trip that takes place in several Honduran cities including Tegucigalpa, Copán, and Tela (Figure 1). Throughout the program, students spend time in three separate classroom settings: rural public, rural social justice–focused not-for-profit bilingual, and urban private bilingual school. These different settings formed the basis of reference for the types of educational opportunities available for Hondurans of different socioeconomic backgrounds and opportunity levels.

Honduras is a country in Central America, covered in mountains and characterized by its high economic



Figure 1. A map of Honduras that includes the three cities we visited during our stay: Tela, Tegucigalpa, and Copán. Photo credit: CIA World Factbook.

growth in relation to other Central American countries and high rates of inequality (World Bank, 2019). The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) cites Honduras as “one of the poorest countries in Latin America” and as having “one of the world’s highest murder rates” (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.). The U.S. Department of State ranks Honduras as a 3—“reconsider travel”—out of 4, 4 being “do not travel,” on the country travel advisory scale (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Just like any country, Honduras has a long history of political, geographical, and social challenges, but recovery from some of these challenges has been slow and difficult.

Honduras has faced many problems beyond human control. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch hit Central America and parts of the southern United States. In Honduras alone, approximately 7,000 people were killed and many more were left without homes or ways of supporting themselves (Newman et al., 1998). Crucial infrastructure such as bridges, roads, and even plumbing systems were wiped out along with people’s homes, farms, schools, and whatever other buildings were unlucky enough to be in Hurricane Mitch’s path (Figure 2). Mudslides, landslides, and flooding followed the hurricane, furthering the damage and trampling the agriculture industry. Not only had many people lost their homes or those they

loved, many also had lost their sources of income, food, and safe water. Shortly after the hurricane, Carlos Flores, the president of Honduras at the time, told Cable News Network (CNN):

We have 75 percent . . . of our major infrastructure either destroyed, damaged or torn apart. Our agriculture is in shambles. All of our major crops, our export products . . . gone. . . . This is something that happens once in a century, but this is the only country that we have, so we have to pick it up, and we will.

Over 20 years later, Honduras has yet to recover fully from Hurricane Mitch. The lives and infrastructure lost were so significant that the damage can still be seen today. There are small tin houses made of spare parts that line the major roadways and are scattered across the mountainsides. These homes have no access to any form of infrastructure such as electricity or plumbing since many of them were constructed out of desperation post-Hurricane Mitch. Many of the people who live in these homes live in poverty and do not own the land their homes sit on. In fact, many people refer to life in Honduras temporally as “pre-Mitch” or “post-Mitch” because the storm and resulting aftermath was so impactful (Stewart, 2018). In addition to hurricanes, Honduras also frequently has to battle droughts, forest fires, earthquakes, general flooding, and mudslides, all of which compromise crops and damage existing systems. Due to the geography and location of Honduras, it will continue to be exposed to harmful natural disasters; however, with more improvement of the systems in place to predict, respond, and recover from natural disasters, the damage done during these incidents can be greatly reduced.

These improvements require capital, something that has been drained away from Honduras since its initial colonization. Honduras was home to a number of indigenous peoples before Christopher Columbus landed in 1502. The Maya are by far the most famous; however, they accounted for a very small percentage of the indigenous population in Honduras (Euraque, 2018). Following the discovery of Central America by European explorers, Honduras’s land, resources, and people were systematically exploited for maximum profit. The indigenous peoples were devastated by disease, European weaponry, and persecution until they posed no threat to the invaders (Woodward et al., 2019). Resources, such as gold, silver, tropical fruit, and at the time slaves, were taken from Honduras and sold in the global market for Spanish gain. In 1840, Honduras gained independence from Spain and



Figure 2. This photo, taken in December 1998, shows the destruction that Hurricane Mitch caused in Tegucigalpa, Honduras's capital. Photo credit: U.S. Geological Survey.

joined newly independent Mexico. Shortly after this, Honduras became fully independent and was finally given full autonomy to govern itself (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2018).

Soon after its independence, Honduras grabbed the attention of several Western fruit companies that bought land in Honduras and began large-scale fruit exportation (Euraque, 2018). This new foreign investment brought infrastructure improvements and jobs to Honduras; however, the infrastructure improvements were centered around the investments and displaced populations of disadvantaged Hondurans. Additionally, the majority of jobs provided were labor-intensive and workers were subject to poor wages and working conditions. Many of these foreign agricultural exporters still operate in Honduras, having worked hard to maintain their grip on Honduran land and produce through nearly

two centuries of civil wars, political turmoil, unionization, and workers' rights protests. More than a few of the political challenges in Honduras can be traced to the foreign corporations with major assets in Honduras. In his 2008 book *Bananas: How the United Fruit Company Shaped the World*, Peter Chapman explains that United Fruit, one of the companies with heavy investment in Honduras and other Central American countries, "had possibly launched more exercises in 'regime change' on the banana's behalf than had even been carried out in the name of oil" (p. 7).

The United States has also become involved in Honduras in ways outside the agricultural export market. In the 1980s, the United States set up anticommunism, anti-Sandinista training camps and military bases throughout Honduras (BBC, 2018). These facilities were meant to continue the fight against communism in Central

America, using Honduras as a base of operations against, specifically, Nicaragua. With a U.S. military presence in Honduras came censorship and human rights abuses against activists of a variety of different causes (Alvarado & Benjamin, 1987; BBC, 2018). Hondurans began to “be disappeared,” a term for the sudden and unexpected death or disappearance of political activists and adversaries. The U.S. military officially left Honduras in the late 1980s due to a perceived end to the threat in Nicaragua and anti-U.S. protests by Hondurans (Alvarado & Benjamin, 1987). However, the United States has continued to influence policy and business decisions in order to protect business investments and foster trade dependencies, usually at the cost of the lower class and the environment (Rodriguez, 2012). Since the U.S. military left, Honduras has had political conflict related to corruption and more human rights abuses, specifically police-endorsed death squads. Today, it still struggles with corruption but many people in Honduras, specifically young adults, are active politically and organize to make sure that policy decisions have the best interests of Honduras in mind. Throughout our study abroad and in the schools we visited, we could see the influence of Honduras’s history and how a combination of corruption, oppression, and U.S. influence has helped shape the education system.

The school where we spent the most time, Twisted Pine School, is located outside Tegucigalpa on a university campus. The school identifies itself as a social justice, community-oriented, not-for-profit, K–10 school (Rodriguez, 2012). The school began as a community-run kindergarten and gradually grew to what it is today. Now, it operates with 40% of students on scholarships in order to further its mission of “provid[ing] a challenging and interactive bilingual education for children from all walks of life.” Many of the students come from the surrounding rural area or are the children of professors at the university. Students are taught the majority of their subjects in English in order to foster multilingualism, and the school is accredited by the U.S. accreditation agency AdvancED. In order to gain accreditation, the school has to follow various guidelines including adopting Texas State Standards. These standards include universal items like geometry, biology, and English, but also Texas history, an odd subject for Honduran students to learn about. Additionally, the school has a community of international teachers, with five of their educators being from the United States and more having had education training in the United States. Since the school is located on a private campus, there is around-the-clock security, with armed guards and guarded gates to both the campus and the school. Twisted Pine School prides

itself on the safe, engaging environment that it is able to provide for students, no matter their background.

Another school we visited was the Rolling Hills International School. Rolling Hills is a college preparation-based private PK–12 school inside Tegucigalpa, the capital city. The school is known for strong academics and is considered one of the most prestigious schools in Honduras. However, the school is significantly less accessible than Twisted Pine, with no scholarships given for the hefty price tag to attend. Classes at Rolling Hills are taught primarily in English with some special subjects being taught in Spanish. Students have access to a wide variety of classes (including AP classes) and extracurricular activities, with an emphasis on making sure Rolling Hills students are prepared for entry into top-tier colleges in Honduras and internationally in the United States and other countries after graduation. Students have extensive security, with armed guards and guarded gates around the grounds. Rolling Hills also has a community of international teachers, some of whom we were able to meet during our trip.

We also visited two rural, K–6 public schools, Escuela Águila Blanca and Escuela Arboles Largos. The schools had 100 and 30 students respectively; however, both schools were similar in the sense that they served poor, rural communities. These schools were very different from Rolling Hills and Twisted Pine. For one, all instruction was in Spanish. The students did not have reliable access to basic school supplies or even clean water, let alone wi-fi and computers. Instead of having a bus, some students walked over an hour to get to school every morning. For security, Escuela Águila Blanca had thick concrete walls around the perimeter and a gate, but Escuela Arboles Largos just had the security of being in the middle of a small community and only accessible by a dirt road that climbed up a ridge. While we spent the majority of our time in Twisted Pine classrooms, the rural schools were far more representative of the state of education for the majority of young Hondurans. Only students who were either lucky enough (if they managed to receive a scholarship) or wealthy enough could get an education like that offered at Twisted Pine and Rolling Hills.

Other than teaching in schools, we also had the opportunity to explore the university campus we were living on, walk around cultural sights in Tegucigalpa, explore the ruins and the city of Copán, and walk the beaches of Tela (Figure 4). We completed journal entries almost every

day and had frequent discussions about readings we had been provided and how they related to what we were experiencing in the schools.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The point of the Honduras Study Abroad program is to create a mutually beneficial experience for the schools we go to and students alike. The foundation of this experience is the relationships fostered between Dr. Phillion and the same community partners that have been working with her for the past 17 years. The impact these relationships have can be seen by the number of PhD and graduate students from Honduran study abroad partner organizations that Dr. Phillion has worked with or connected to resources at Purdue. Additionally, the study abroad program supports multiple locally owned businesses during the trip every year. For Rolling Hills and Twisted Pines, we were able to expose students to new ideas and viewpoints while also helping them practice their English (Figure 3). For instance, the students were

very surprised to learn that in the United States, high schools do not have recess. After observing a couple days of class, I was stunned I managed to survive high school without a recess. We were also able to give some of the teachers a much needed break during the last few weeks of school by teaching lessons and grading papers. Having us at the schools was especially impactful for the teachers from the United States who enjoyed being able to talk to educators-in-training from their home country about their experiences and what led them to Honduras.

For the rural schools, we provided a more tangible form of support through donations of school supplies and first aid equipment. We also once again gave teachers a much needed break at the end of the school year by playing games and leading crafts with the students.

STUDENT-AUTHOR IMPACT

One of the biggest takeaways for me on the Honduras trip was witnessing how a variety of educational systems function. While Twisted Pines' and Rolling Hills' systems were U.S.-inspired, they also had fundamental differences. For example, students had to pass an oral exam on the words to the Honduran National Anthem in order to graduate, which is not a requirement in U.S. schools. The classroom setup was often more dynamic than the traditional rows of desks seen in many U.S. classrooms. Especially at Twisted Pines, students were often encouraged to work where they needed to in order to be the most productive, whether that be outside or on the floor instead of at their tables. Also at Twisted Pines, students were often asked about the viability of their assignments. Students would be asked if they had the resources to complete their assignments at home, since the students came from a variety of backgrounds. I enjoyed watching the students operate in educational environments that were not typical of the kinds I was used to, having gone to school in the same public school district for my entire childhood.

We were at the rural schools for significantly less time than Twisted Pines or Rolling Hills, but it was interesting to see the polarization of educational resources between the rural schools and the other schools we had been observing and teaching in. The rural schools had little to no access to clean water, food, or school supplies, but students still came to school so they could get an education. The reality for many students in Honduras is that their only options are poorly funded public schools, painfully expensive private schools, or no school at all due to their parents not being able to afford the cost of labor of



Figure 3. Two Study Abroad students participate in an engineering design lesson by asking students about their Mars base prototypes. Photo credit: Kira Drake.



Figure 4. A view of part of the city of Copán from our hotel window shows the beautiful landscape of Honduras. Photo credit: Daphne Fauber.

the student leaving home. It was eye-opening to see this reality first-hand, especially since most of our time was spent with more fortunate students during the trip.

I highly enjoyed the readings we did, especially *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo* by Elvia Alvarado, translated by Medea Benjamin. In the book, Elvia tells the candid story of her work as a human rights activist in Honduras. She is open about the struggles she faced as both a woman and someone born into poverty, which elicited many discussions during our evening classes about parallels between gender and class politics in both the United States and Honduras. The book also covered U.S. involvement, activist movements, and issues with study abroad-type programs in Honduras. Even though the book is over 30 years old, we were still able to see examples of what she outlined during our trip.

As someone who is from the United States, it was also interesting to see the impact of U.S. foreign policy and influence on other countries. Often, other countries are held to a “Western standard,” meaning their value is derived from how closely they resemble a Western country. In the United States, this idea is subconsciously ingrained in our culture. Even in Honduras, Twisted Pines and Rolling Hills sought to be “better” by following U.S. standards and teaching styles, even though the United States is not particularly well known for the quality of its education system.

CONCLUSION

In order to be a globally conscious citizen, I think it is important to travel and witness how different groups live. Honduras is home to a large population of people

living in poverty, many of whom have been robbed of the opportunity to better their situation by systematic oppression, political turmoil, natural disasters, or sheer bad luck. Honduras is also home to people who follow YouTubers, play the newest video games, and see the newest summer blockbuster with their friends. Just like any country, Honduras has a mix of wealth and opportunity that is a product of its history. I am honored to have had the opportunity to learn some of this history and participate in an educational program that provides so much real-world experience to those who are involved. I am also honored to have had a program leader who truly cares about giving students a realistic worldview and encouraging us to think critically about what it means to be an educator in a complex, sometimes harsh world.

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