



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand

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“We were about to live in relatively challenging conditions, and we still weren’t even entirely sure what we had committed to do by way of work for the week. There was no turning back, and there was nowhere else to go.”

Reflections on Service Learning in Waco, Texas

I didn’t hesitate one second in responding “yes” when three Cornell students I know very well—Rachel Moline ’17, MariKate Murphy ’18, and Carly Pierson ’17—asked my wife, Rachelle, and me to join them on a service-learning trip. Neither Rachelle nor I had ever been on an alternative spring break trip before. We didn’t know much about the trip they were planning. We knew that it was to Waco, Texas, and involved sustainability, gardening, and animals. But, we didn’t know what we would be doing. We weren’t sure who else would be going on the trip. We just knew that it was over spring break and that we couldn’t imagine saying “no.”

Nine months passed and spring break approached. Rachelle and I were still looking forward to the trip. But, we were nervous. We still didn’t have many details.

Spring break finally arrived. Eleven students (Leaders: Rachel, MariKate, and Carly; as well as Lauren Ahart ’17, Morgan Barnard ’20, Morgan Brim ’18, Mackenzie Crow ’18, Danielle Polson ’18, Maya Peske ’20, Jennifer Walter ’17, and Meredith Whisenhunt ’18), Rachelle, and I left the Hilltop at 4:10 a.m. on a Saturday morning on our 15-plus hour journey to the World Hunger Relief farm in Waco, Texas. The 15-person van was packed to the gills with people, bags, food, music, books, technology, and pillows. You name it, it was in there. In fact, we were so numerous, that Rachelle had to drive a second car behind the van (which turned out to be a godsend, as I’ll mention later).

Sixteen hours later, having made it, in particular, through the maze of Dallas highways, construction, and traffic (and a couple hours of heavy rainstorms), we finally arrived at the World Hunger Relief farm, shortly after 8 p.m. that evening.

We were exhausted and sore. We were hungry. It was dark and raining heavily. It was muddy. We finally found our contact at World Hunger Relief and were

directed to our lodging—a replica of a typical Habitat for Humanity home built for a family in Nicaragua—about 15 by 20 feet in dimensions. It was a one-room house with a concrete floor, four apertures as windows (no actual glass windows but screens and shutters), a small wood-burning stove, and two elevated mattresses. No plumbing. No electricity. In fact, there was no lighting. The house fell far below what anyone had expected.

We left the farm in search of dinner—a meal that turned out to be a very quiet one as we individually processed our living conditions for the week. It is almost axiomatic that one should not contemplate challenges when tired and hungry. But, we had no choice. We were directly confronted by our immediate reality—we were about to live in relatively challenging conditions, and we still weren't even entirely sure what we had committed to do by way of work for the week. There was no turning back, and there was nowhere else to go.

Given that we were 13 and the room was small, three students volunteered to sleep in our van for the entire week. Rachelle and I decided to sleep in my small car for the week. (That alone was an experience ... but what irony to simulate poverty by sleeping in a car, and a relatively nice one at that.) Ultimately, Nicaragua House—"Nic House" as it came to be known—only needed to accommodate eight individuals, which meant that you could walk in and not step on someone else or kick the bucket that was collecting rainwater leaking from the roof. It was tight, but doable.

At the farm all toilets are composting, which means "flushing" with a cupful of sawdust. There are two sitting toilets and one traditional "squatty potty" that we were all encouraged to use at least once. While there is an outdoor shower, it is of such a condition that most of us simply chose to go showerless for the week. Clean clothes were not even remotely on our minds. Staying warm and dry was front and center for us.

As it turns out, in addition to farm chores and community projects, we focused largely on world poverty during the week. World Hunger Relief is "a Christian organization committed to the alleviation of hunger around the world." (worldhungerrelief.org) As such, we engaged in exercises that sought to educate us about and help us experience poverty to the extent possible within the context of our reality—that we would all be returning to our relatively comfortable lives after six days.

In the middle of the week, our program leaders organized a lunch by creating an artificial class status system, with the goal of mimicking global wealth distribution. One selected student sat alone at a nicely appointed table (with flowers even). She was served a pork chop, with a nice rice dish, salad, and dessert. She had a pitcher of clean water. And, someone was there to serve her and ensure her comfort and satisfaction. It was a lovely looking meal. Right next to her, two others (including Rachelle) sat in chairs at another table and received a bowl of rice and a bowl of beans, clean drinking water, and the appropriate utensils for eating and drinking. Less nice, but still nice. The rest of us were in a circle on the floor (which was not clean—recall that we were on a farm and it had rained). Our program leaders placed a large bowl of rice in the middle of the circle with a jar of dirty water (coffee grounds—just so you know that that water was, in fact, luxuriously potable.) We had no utensils. We had no plates or cups. We passed the bowl of rice around the circle, as everyone grabbed a portion by hand. We passed the jar of dirty water around too, with some of us declining to even drink. Our program leaders encouraged us to *lean into* our hunger that afternoon so that we would better appreciate the extreme poverty that one in five individuals in developing regions experience on a daily basis.¹

We spent another day living below the poverty line. LOTOS=Living On The Other Side is what we learned the day was called. For breakfast we were given 13 cents, which approximates what 50% of the world roughly has to spend for breakfast (based on an average daily income of \$2.50). We could earn extra pennies for breakfast by completing

¹ According to the United Nations, one in five individuals in developing regions lives on less than \$1.25 per day. See un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/. According to the World Bank, 10% of the world's population lives on less than \$1.90 per day. See worldbank.org/en/publication/poverty-and-shared-prosperity

specific tasks around the farm. It wasn't that simple. The breakfast was designed to simulate the instability of LOTOS reality. Some of us had our money "stolen." Others were incentivized to do wrong to others in order to earn more money for food. There was a "store" set up with breakfast items, ranging from prohibitively expensive bottles of iced Starbucks coffee, to oatmeal, Pop-Tarts, bananas, and milk. The prices for our breakfast items increased quickly and in unpredictable ways throughout the exercise. Everything was unstable; nothing was guaranteed. In the end, we had to work together to ensure that everyone had something to eat for breakfast. For example, because of limited resources, several of us had oatmeal out of the same bowl, using the same spoon.

Then we turned to the primary LOTOS endeavor for the day—working for our dinner—all day. (There would be no lunch.) We were given work projects around the farm for which we could earn dinner items, ranging from a bag of uncooked rice, dry lentils, a few vegetables, a 10-gallon Igloo container of water (which we had to haul about 600 meters to use), a rocket stove, a pot (or two), a knife, a bowl, and some spices. Further, if we wanted to eat meat, we had to earn, catch, kill, feather/skin, gut, and prepare a chicken ourselves (which, thanks to the courage of our students, we accomplished). In fact, one student—Mackenzie Crow—courageously volunteered from the outset to be the one to kill the chicken, noting that it would be hypocritical for him to eat chicken, but not be able to participate in the death of that same animal. And, so we did. Again, nothing was guaranteed; everything required more work than we had expected. For example, Danielle Polson spent over five hours feeding twigs (that we had collected from all over the farm) to one rocket stove, so that we could cook one pot of rice, lentils, and vegetables. Every element of our meal had to be earned, and it took all 13 of us *all* day (a 10-hour, no-lunch day) working in order to earn the food and the tools necessary to prepare the dinner AND to make the dinner. Our meal was simple, and yet, we all thought that it was quite good.

As we shared our meal, including with our two World Hunger Relief leaders, we reflected upon the week. The leaders also offered some of their observations of us as a group. At the highest level, what they had noticed is that the Cornell team had stuck together all week through every exercise, project, and challenge. We consistently communicated with each other. The leaders noted that this had not happened before with other groups at the same level; apparently, it is much more typical for people to break into pairs or to work alone.

During the week we also had our regular animal chores, feeding the farm's chickens, pigs, and goats. We volunteered at two local middle

STUDENT REFLECTION

Mackenzie Crow '18

It was rather surreal when the group came together to realize that we were all relatively financially well-off students who were paying an organization to simulate impoverishing us. This point was driven deeper when one of the heads of the program told us how, when she proudly mentioned this program to her South African friend, she was met with intense adversity and disgust. Her friend could not grasp why, when those about whom we were learning were unable to escape their reality, we wealthy foreigners couldn't just understand her pain; that we needed to act like we could *feel* her pain by "playing pretend," as it were. It truly put into perspective for me the impact of the "hero" mentality that surrounds organizations with charitable intentions when they seem intent on doing good by their own standards, not genuinely listening to the desires of those they're trying to help.



STUDENT REFLECTION

Carly Pierson '17

Something that stands out to me is how we all came together as a group. We all had different strengths and weaknesses, and we recognized that in each other. Some people's strength was in their continuous optimism; others had deep wells of patience, physical stamina, comfortableness with animals ... the list goes on. During the week we had together, we each had times when we exhibited these strengths (and times when it was more difficult to do so). Those strengths expressed by some members became the strengths of our group as a whole, and we learned to accept each other's differences, working around them and working through them.

This made me reflect upon my actions in my daily life at Cornell. I could try to do everything myself. I could push myself during the cross-country and track workouts. I could study alone until late at night. I could rely on myself to get through tough times when I feel alone or inadequate for the challenges ahead. But when I have people, friends, classmates, a team by my side, I get so much more out of the experience. I learn more, and I am a fuller human being. It's the people around us who support us, and who we support, that makes the trip—and life—worthwhile.



school garden clubs, doing some relatively heavy work, like rolling enormous logs up a road in order to make a garden with them. These were, of course, highlights of the trip, not only because we enjoyed interacting with middle school students (as well as being with the farm animals) but also because we were able to connect the World Hunger Relief's mission to Waco, Texas, a city in which 26% of its citizens live in poverty.

As with most service learning projects, our moments of group reflection were memorable. In fact, Rachele and I will be contemplating this trip for years to come. I still think about Waco—when I go to my refrigerator, get into my car, or go to Gary's Supermarket in town. Everything is easier for us, and, at some level, it is because we are fortunate.

So, what did we learn from this trip?

For Rachele and me, we had the following takeaways:

- Most people can live with less, and the vast majority do.
- Generally speaking, we waste a lot. (During the trip, we made better use of our limited resources.)
- When people can't meet their most basic needs, their decision-making is necessarily short-term—the immediate. Long-term thinking and planning is a luxury that we cannot take for granted.
- Progress requires stability—good social, legal, and logistical infrastructure.
- We are never as good alone as we are as a team.

Ultimately, it always comes back to our learning outcomes. It is our goal that all Cornell students achieve “intellectual, moral, and personal growth” as well as gain a commitment to “civic and social responsibility.” Empathy—which loosely correlates to *understanding* what someone else is feeling or experiencing—plays an important role in the achievement of this growth. Service learning is one powerful, direct way for all of us, including students, to develop, in an enduring way, empathy for the lives and contexts of others.

As one of our World Hunger Relief program leaders mentioned—empathy requires us to appreciate the experiences of others. It allows us to confront the reality that we don't know everything—particularly what others experience. And, maybe the outcome of our Waco trip is the recognition that we all should always live in a state of perpetual reflection. The tension between meeting our needs, however we define them, and surrendering some of them in favor of serving those around us requires regular, ongoing awareness. There is no way to resolve or eliminate that tension. It exists. Sometimes it's a win-win where everyone comes out ahead. Other times it might be a zero-sum game where someone gets something and someone else loses something.

Perhaps what is most important is that that ongoing tension always needs to stay front and center in our minds. How people resolve that tension (or don't) is an eminently personal decision; it is not our place to tell others how to lead their lives.

It is also worth noting, as delineated by Iowa Campus Compact, an organization which encourages civic and community work at colleges and universities, that such engagement builds the very skills that employers seek. More specifically,

- » **92%** of business leaders believe volunteering expands an employee's professional skill set and **82%** are more likely to choose a candidate with volunteering experience. In 2016-17:
 - 126 Cornell students and 25 faculty-staff volunteered for community events through the Mount Vernon-Lisbon Community Development Group.
 - 5 students served on the Mount Vernon-Lisbon Emergency Medical Services.
 - 600 Cornell students volunteered 15,600 hours of their time for community service, most of it locally, for a value of \$367,536.
 - 60 students participated in Lunch Buddies (lunch with a 3rd grader each week at Washington Elementary School in Mount Vernon).
 - In 2016 Cornell ranked 7th among Breakaway Spring Break Chapters nationally for percentage of students participating, with more than 100 students participating in spring break service trips. 73 students participated in 2017.
 - Cornell's AmeriCorps program had 8 students who commit to serve 300 hours of service each with local community partners of their choice.
- » **Three in four** employers say they want colleges to place more emphasis on critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.
 - 91% of the Class of 2015 reported that their service-learning experience(s) contributed to their development in critical thinking.
- » Employers also **support** practices that involved applying learning including collaborative problem-solving, internships, research, senior projects, and community engagements.
 - 89.6% of the Class of 2016 completed an internship or capstone project.
 - 93% of the Class of 2015 participated in a high-impact practice: a learning community, service learning, research with faculty, an internship, study abroad, or a culminating senior experience.
- » **Almost all employers** surveyed agree that students should get experience solving problems with people whose views are different from their own.
 - 52% of the Class of 2016 studied off-campus for a block or longer.
 - The Class of 2020 came from 34 states and 12 foreign countries, and includes 25% students of color (domestic) and 7% international students.
- » Written and oral communication, teamwork skills, ethical decision-making, critical thinking, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings are **the most highly valued** by employers.²
 - Our learning outcomes assessments reveal that our One Course curriculum within our liberal arts focus facilitates the achievement of these outcomes.

² Giving Voice to the Civic Mission of Higher Education, Iowa Campus Compact. Please see: iacampuscompact.org/giving-voice/

STUDENT REFLECTION

Morgan Barnard '20

My one takeaway from this trip would be that we can change the world, even if it is just in the smallest of ways. We have the power to make a difference if we so choose. It can be anything from volunteer work to simply looking at something from a different point of view. One of the biggest tools is understanding. Once you understand what people are going through around the world in situations far different from your own, then you can see what needs to be done and what you can do to help.



Critical thinking, which is at the heart of the academic enterprise and essential to professional and personal success, also requires reflection. During our time in Waco (and afterward), we struggled with the root of our experience. We had more questions than answers. Was it insulting or demeaning that we *chose* to live a life for one week that roughly approximates what others have no choice but to live? Or, was this the most effective way for us to learn how 80% of the world exists on a daily basis?

Relative to others, I lack for so little. I can largely eat what I want when I want it. I know where I'll sleep. I have safety nets. Yet, I inherently know that the way to eradicate poverty isn't that we all must work at not-for-profits or take vows of poverty in order to contribute to social progress. Bankers, lawyers, investors, CEOs—some of the most publicly vilified professional positions—are critical to that social advancement. Everyone can have a role. And, people shouldn't feel guilty about being financially successful or having privileges that others don't. We ALL need people of different skills and backgrounds.

This Waco trip also taught us to be more mindful about the resources we consume and the impact of such consumption. It's complicated in that "small" daily decisions we make often have much larger global ramifications.

At a personal level, during the week I realized how hard it really is to catch up or even get ahead when so much of one's time is spent on basic survival—having safe and warm lodging, securing and maintaining a job; making enough money to acquire food; spending the time to make the food. A recent New York Times Corner Office article noted the following (within the context of work settings): "... nobody ever comes up with a brilliant idea when they're being chased by a lion." As I reflect on this statement within the context of poverty, it may stand for the proposition that it is hard to get ahead when one's day is only about survival—eating, sleeping, staying warm, and being safe. Further, what does this level of poverty mean in terms of all of the untapped human potential when so many lives are being chased by lions?

Cornell students never cease to amaze. Notwithstanding challenging conditions, they kept their enthusiastic and encouraging demeanor. They couldn't and wouldn't give up. They remained highly communicative with each other (which meant that we were more efficient as a group). They remained engaged—continuing to volunteer

to do whatever was asked of them throughout the week and also taking initiative to take care of tasks, as needed. And, they regularly reflected on the meaning of our work and projects, and then shared those reflections with the team.

When we arrived we were destabilized by our new conditions and environment, and we had to re-stabilize ourselves individually and also collectively. We had to develop our own individual systems and then one functional system that would work for all of us. Such an experience, especially under more difficult conditions, offers longer-term value beyond this trip, because it is very similar to what we must regularly do when we join new teams with new goals. We readjust our own needs and figure out how we fit into the larger structure and purpose, making adaptations along the way.

In a very immediate way, this trip challenged our worldview and integrated other realities into that picture. We are all different because of this trip, and I am confident that we will be thinking about it for years to come.

Have you had life-changing, service-learning experiences? I want to hear about them and share them with others. Please feel free to contact me with your story.



Jonathan Brand
PRESIDENT

*This presidential white paper is part of a series on matters of importance to Cornellians.
I welcome any comments or observations you might have on this white paper topic.
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