

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

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## **Abstract**

*Community Engagement Abroad: Perspectives and Practices on Service, Engagement, and Learning Overseas*, edited by Pat Crawford and Brett Berquist, is a valuable contribution to the literature on global community engagement and study abroad, charting one institution's history and practice from a variety of perspectives.

**Keywords:** community engagement, education abroad

What happens when a group of colleagues come together to share their experiences with overseas community engagement? In the case of a group of Michigan State University (MSU) faculty and administrators, the result is a unique volume offering honest insights and practical know-how from which others can learn. *Community Engagement Abroad: Perspectives and Practices on Service, Engagement, and Learning Overseas*, edited by Pat Crawford and Brett Berquist, is a valuable contribution to the literature on global community engagement and study abroad, charting one institution's history and practice from a variety of perspectives.

As described in the preface, the volume is an invitation to others to learn from the honest reflections of faculty, staff, and administrators at MSU. Put together like a family quilt, each chapter is a distinctive quilt block with its own pattern, style, and perspective. Each addresses different program models with

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different goals, in different disciplines, in a variety of geographic locations. Each essay can stand alone, but together they tell a compelling story about the history and evolution of overseas community engagement within one institution. The reader comes away with an appreciation for MSU's commitment to overseas programming as reflected in the essays of all 19 contributors.

The volume begins by tracing the path of engaged learning at MSU, as it developed under different leaders and became a university priority and part of the mission of this land-grant institution. This history is followed in Chapter 2 with a useful, but non-exhaustive, review of key literature and research on service-learning and study abroad and, perhaps more importantly, presents a framework for analyzing different kinds of experiential learning programs. Influenced by Lili and John Engle's (2003) taxonomy of study abroad programs, the authors create a grid that identifies low, medium, and high levels of community engagement by identifying 12 different program components (e.g., program length, use of local language, housing, reciprocity with host, sustainability of community partnership, connection to home curriculum, faculty role, etc.). Each program model in the book is located on the chart according to its characteristics. This serves as a useful reference for readers in understanding the level of engagement of the programs cited in the book and provides a way to analyze their own programs as well.

Deep reflection is the common thread that stitches together the subsequent chapters that describe specific programs. Because of the breadth of academic offerings at MSU, the programs discussed in the volume include those intended for medical students and engineers as well as for liberal arts students. The chapter headings highlight a general theme that each specific program addresses. For instance, the co-authors in Chapter 3 describe their program in India, but also explore the challenges of short-term faculty-led programs with limited time in-country. In this chapter and elsewhere the issue of how an institution can support faculty who develop, lead, and sustain global programs is raised. Chapter 7, for example, provides a detailed analysis of a longstanding program in Peru and suggests a way to create structures and practices for program sustainability that honor the foundational work of the faculty and partners who establish programs while giving their successors freedom to grow in new directions.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer examples of two very distinct programs that have emerged from different medical schools at MSU.. These programs stand in sharp contrast in terms of their program components, yet each delivers a transformative learning experience for future health professionals that meets the specific learning outcomes for which it was designed.

Partnerships between universities is the focus in Chapter 4. The discussion of an exchange program with TU Dortmund University in Germany

for students in urban studies reveals the obstacles and opportunities in student exchange programs.

Chapter 8 takes up the topic of complex partnerships between universities and communities. By applying a partnership model that includes students and residents, the authors critically examine the roles and contributions of all partners to inform program design, preparation, and evaluation. Of particular note is the discussion on the importance of preparing students for the different and sometimes conflicting perspectives of homestay hosts, non-profit partners, and community members on community issues and even the study abroad program itself.

The final chapter examines some hard truths about civic engagement in the study abroad context and the inherent “perplexities, dilemmas, and illusions” one encounters in this work. While not offering answers, the author invites us to seriously engage the ethical implications of global community engagement.

The book’s conclusion endeavors to relate the chapters to one another and to bind them together using a theoretical framework with graphic illustrations, which, to this reader at least, seemed overly complex. The narrative summarizing the approach of each chapter’s authors, however, was very useful as a conclusion.

This volume set out to be a collaborative effort of MSU faculty and staff colleagues; however, given the very nature of community engagement in higher education, perhaps greater inclusion of student and partner voices could have enhanced this work and further demonstrated their important role as partners in this educational endeavor. While a few chapters included quotes and perspectives from student participants, a co-authored chapter with students would have been a valuable addition. Also, a chapter offering the experience and perspective of a community partner from the Global South could have deepened the conversation, particularly as it relates to building and sustaining partnerships that truly focus on the needs of the community.

Practical and deeply reflective, *Community Engagement Abroad* reminds us of the value of creating a community of practice and what can come from investing time in understanding the history and evolution of engaged teaching and learning at one institution. Given the siloed nature of academic work, it is heartening to see that gathering an interdisciplinary group of colleagues who are similarly committed to global community engagement can lead to fruitful learning, knowledge-sharing, creative problem-solving, and new scholarship. Readers will come away with an understanding of the complexity of this educational endeavor and perhaps a greater appreciation of its transformative potential as well as its challenges.

## References

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## Author Biography

**Laurie Laird** is the Director of the Moreau Center for Service and Justice which partners with local and global communities to engage critical human and environmental concerns through active learning, mutually beneficial service, and experience-based leadership development. She has more than 20 years in higher education creating and supporting sustained community engagement and short-term immersive experiences in local and global contexts.