

Ethical Experiential Learning at UT:
Adapted from the ethical volunteering guide developed by www.ethicalvolunteering.org

Structured experiential learning at UT includes exchange programs, required internships, alternative spring break programs, and classes with community-based projects (sometimes identified as “*academic service-learning*” courses, depending on how the course is structured and instructed).

When trying to identify an ethical experiential learning program at UT or elsewhere, step one is to look at the way the program presents and markets itself. Step two is to question the program more specifically, and step three is to question yourself. You can also use this framework to critique / work to improve experiential learning that you might be *required* to complete as a student – including via core course assignments.

When considering experiential learning opportunities, most people concentrate on the cost, places they want to travel and/or communities they want to work with or ‘help,’ and when the experience occurs – along with graduation requirements.

It is also critical to ask what’s in it for the host community and/or for the people you are off to work with.

This three-part guide (adapted from a similar guide produced by www.ethicalvolunteering.org) provides some clues to more ethical experiential learning – and how to create such programs.

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Step One: How does the program or opportunity present and market itself

1.) Look at the pictures and words the program uses to tell you about their work and/or partners.

With experiential learning, the quality of the relationship the sending (or organizing) program has with the host community and/or organizations is critical. You want to look for a program with a respectful - not a patronizing or colonialist - attitude about their partners and/or work sites. There are lots of clues to be found in the pictures and words a program uses to describe its partners and/or the communities they serve – along with who serves to promote the program and how it is presented.

While many experiential learning programs rely on images of children to make community-based work seem friendly, innocent and so on, most international development agencies by comparison are very careful about using images of children in their advertising. Watch out for programs that use lots (or even only) pictures of children to illustrate their projects.

In colonial times, the developing world - and particularly, Africa - was seen as 'childlike' - an idea that seemed to give western countries the 'right' to take charge, to be the parent and to know best. This sense of 'child' and 'adult' encourages a patronizing approach to community-based work.

When looking at a program's promotional images, are all pictures of children (or other community members) being 'helped' by students / participants? Where are the images of students / participants working along side people of their own age (or with younger / older community members)? Look for a program that represents site communities in a positive way.

Words are as important as pictures. Find a program that describes the people they work with in positive, respectful ways. Avoid programs that make it sound like you will be 'changing the world' (you won't be). Watch out for those that describe where you go as a place 'of poverty and need', there are always resourceful active people dealing with their own problems in every community in every country in the world.

Related, be critical of who promotes a program and how it is promoted. Can community members access how the program is being promoted? Are they involved in the promotion?

2.) Be wary of the BIG programs

Big is not always best. Many of the better programs are small. They work with specific communities and partners whom they know well.

3.) Look for programs that attempt to identify student skills

If you don't know how to do something in your own community then you are unlikely to know how to do it in someone else's. Be wary of programs that ask you to do something you will not have or will gain the skills for.

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There is a risk that academic community-based work becomes a way for students to go and practice, have a go at, things that they would never be allowed to do at 'home' or in another setting. This is using someone else's community as a place to experiment (a 'laboratory') - or somewhere to play- this is when community-based work becomes colonialism.

Look for experiential learning programs that are interested in who you are and the skills you have – and/or relates your service to the training / instruction you will receive or have received...

4.) Does the program 'select' its participants?

A good program will want to make sure that they are sending the right people - not just the right number of people. This means that finding suitable participants will be about more than making sure their cheques don't bounce. Programs that have some form of interview or selection process are probably more interested in the quality of the participants they send and the projects they complete than those that don't. So, though a selection or interview process might seem a drag – its existence is a clue to the ethics of the program.

5.) Pre-departure and return briefings

The better prepared you are the better participant in experiential learning you will be. Look at what pre-departure training and support a program offers. Those programs that offer de-briefings when you complete your experience demonstrate they still have an interest in you after you have paid your money and/or completed the program - once again this gives you a clue to the ethics of the program.

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Step Two: Question the experiential learning program more specifically

Here are eight questions to help you assess the quality of the experiential learning program or opportunity before you agree to participate:

1.) Exactly what work will I be doing? Can the program provide me with a brief job description?

A good experiential learning program should be able to tell you what you will be doing - including how many hours a day, how many days a week and what sort of work it will be. The greatest source of dissatisfaction for participants comes from not doing what they planned (and/or paid) to do.

2.) Does the program work with a community partner organization?

If an experiential learning program is to be of value to a community, it should work with, rather than be imposed on, that community. Find out who that partner is and find out about the relationship. Key things to look for are whether someone from the local organization is involved in the day to day management of your project, what sort of consultation went on to build that project, and why the project is of value, from a community perspective..

3.) Does the program make any financial contribution to its community partners? If so exactly how much is this?

Many experiential learning programs charge a lot of money – be it through tuition costs or other fees. But where does it all go? Experiential learning programs often need funds as well as labor - indeed, in much of the world, unskilled labor is often one thing of which there is little shortage. **The most important thing is that your program is up front about how your money is spent.** Ask for a budget, and/or be persistent about getting a clear sense of how funds are used and/or how they benefit the local community. In a best case scenario, you and community partners will be involved in financial decision-making.

4.) Does the program have sustainable development policies? If so, how are they implemented?

Look for programs that have a long-term commitment to a community, employ local staff and have some mechanism for local consultation and decision-making. Otherwise, how do you know that the house you built is really needed? That an adult literacy program is not more relevant than a new bridge, or that when you have left there will be the funds and commitment to maintain the project upon which you have worked?

5.) What time frame is the program run on?

A well-structured experiential learning program should have a clear time-frame, and community partners should know whether a program will continue or not. Programs or opportunities that just

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occur once can be problematic. Establishing the level of commitment a program has to a given project or community is vital in establishing the quality, and therefore value, of that program.

6.) Can the program give you precise details in advance?

Experiential learning programs tend to work in one of two ways. The better ones build a relationship with a host organization, identify local needs they can meet, arrange placements and projects and then fill the vacancies. A less positive approach is to wait for participants to sign up and pay up, and then find relevant placements. A good program should be able to let you know several months before it begins where you will be going and what exactly you will be doing. If they cannot, or will not, give you these details then be very wary of the quality of the program. Hastily arranged programs can be disorganized, leaving both participants and local hosts with unclear expectations.

7.) What support & training will you receive?

Experiential learning programs offer vastly different levels of training and support. Look for programs that offer not only pre-departure / pre-project training but also in-country / in-project training and support. As a participant, you want to be as much use as possible, learn as much as possible, and have as good a time as possible. Training in both the practicalities of your project work and the culture of where you are working will all help you get and give the most.

Local support is also important. The type of program you are participating in affects the amount of support required, but make sure you know what to expect. Make sure there is somebody in the community with direct responsibility for you. All projects require some problem solving at some point and you will need someone on hand to help you with this.

8.) Does the program comply with your university's human subjects research and/or travel policies and procedures (if applicable)?

An experiential learning program that is not in step with university policies and procedures puts participants at risk – and is not ethical. This includes in terms of how participants are transported (vehicle rentals, etc.) and how they work with certain populations. Policies should be clear and understood by all. Bad / problematic / unclear policies that interfere with experiential learning should be challenged by program organizers, not by-passed or ignored.

Verify with the program organizer that the program is in compliance with your university's human subjects research and/or travel policies and procedures. In terms of travel, you will be asked to complete certain forms for off-campus experiential learning. For research involving the community (surveys, interviews, etc), in most cases, you will need to submit a research plan for human subjects research review.

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Step Three: Questions to ask yourself before enrolling for this course or other service-learning class / participating in experiential learning at UT.

1.) Are you willing to inform yourself as much as possible about the community and/or organization you are about to travel to / work with?

It is not enough just to turn up / call up and hope everything will be obvious. It won't be. Before you travel / attempt to work with a community or organization, learn as much as you can about where you are going / who you will be working with.

Once you arrive in the community / start working with the community, keep learning. Read the local papers, go to local events, keep up with local and national news and, of course, talk to people. History, politics and culture will not simply reveal all their complexities to the student (or the instructor) who, however interested, can't be bothered to do any research.

2.) Do you feel ready to take on the assignment you have been asked to complete?

Be honest about what skills you feel you have to offer and take on a role that is appropriate. Be it web work, construction, marketing or so on, if you are participating because you want to learn new skills then make sure you are not expected to bring any skills with you.

3.) Are you ready to travel / interact as a learner and a guest?

None of us become project participants (or developers) for purely altruistic reasons. Rather, we do it because it is exciting, because we might learn something, because we want to meet new people who live lives different to our own and because, just maybe, we might have something to offer. By acknowledging why we participate we tell our hosts not that they should be the grateful recipients of our altruism, but rather that they are people we can learn from and with. We ask them to be our teachers, not just tell them to be our students.

Experiential learning can be a great way for people from different cultures and communities to learn about one another. But for this to happen, as the student (or instructor) who has the privilege to travel to and/or work via distance with a community, you need to be ready to share yourself and learn from those you visit / work with.

4.) Are you prepared to be professional?

Participating in experiential learning is not just a 'cool' thing to do. You are making a commitment to those that organize (or require) your participation and those that host you. The worst experiential learning experiences tend to occur when the expectations of the sending organization(s), the student/participant and the host organization do not match up. Having secured a basic job description from your sending or host organizations are you ready to commit to taking on this role? Turning up late, leaving early, not completing work can all be very disruptive – and can negatively impact the relationships of the experiential learning opportunity.

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5.) Are you prepared to be flexible?

In becoming an experiential learning student you have chosen to go and meet and work with people who might be 'different' from yourself. So you need to expect things to be different. This may mean different approaches to communication, to time keeping, to organization; it may mean different ways of managing projects and different expectations for project outcomes- and you need to be ready to work with these differences.

Ultimately this means being humble enough to learn from others, and open enough to say when you don't understand. If you want, or expect things to be just like they are in your home community, then why are you participating in this program?

6.) Are you ready to take responsibility for your own health & safety?

Many experiential learning opportunities occur a long ways from home you need to be ready to take responsibility for your own health - mental and physical. Your sending organization(s) won't always be able to anticipate every situation, and it is important that you feel up to making decisions for yourself in the situation you are entering. Be aware of the differences between projects that work with teams and have permanent supervision and those where you might be on a lone placement - choose what feels right for you. Make yourself aware of local health issues and make sure you have adequate insurance.