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CURQ Web Vignettes

Applying Community-based Learning in Teaching and Researching Contemporary Slavery

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Over the past several years, student demand for courses, research opportunities, and internships in the realm of human rights and modern-day slavery has reached a tipping point, for several reasons. First, social media have made contemporary slavery a familiar issue. MTV's Exit Campaign (<http://mtvexit.org>), for instance, has informed at least 20 million people about the subject since the campaign's launch in 2004. Second, Hollywood has taken notice. With films like 2009's *Taken*, starring Liam Neeson as a father who single-handedly (even if unrealistically) rescues his daughter from the clutches of sex traffickers in Europe, students know trafficking is a moral evil that should be fought. Third, policymakers have transcended partisan politics and embraced legislation to fight modern-day slavery. In February 2013, for instance, the U.S. Senate voted unanimously in support of an amendment to the Violence Against Women Act to help child victims of sex trafficking. President Obama gave a major speech on modern-day slavery in 2012 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/endttrafficking>). Accordingly, a growing number of incoming college freshmen not only want to major (or concentrate) in the study of human rights, but also want to spend part of their careers tackling human-rights abuses, including contemporary slavery.

In the past two years, I have compiled a teaching and research portfolio on modern-day slavery using community-based learning. Here I highlight some lessons learned and suggest next steps to deepen this teaching and research agenda, particularly for institutions such as mine, a small liberal arts college in the American South. This is especially appropriate given the recent 150th anniversary of President Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Community-based Learning

Community-based learning (CBL) has proven invaluable in developing a teaching and research agenda on contemporary slavery. At the University of Richmond, CBL encompasses any type of experiential learning in which students connect with the community. However, CBL is more than the occasional field trip or guest speaker. Rather, as Terry Dolson of the campus's Bonner Center for Civic Engagement has said, CBL challenges students to become co-educators rather than passive participants as they engage members of the community, reflect on their experiences, and add their own insights to course content. At the same time, there is no geographic boundary with CBL. Thus, although some of my students have interned with two local antislavery non-governmental organizations in Richmond, Virginia, another student (inspired by a class module I taught on human trafficking) applied for and received a grant for summer 2013 to research the relationship between contemporary slavery and environmental degradation alongside graduate students at the University of Denver's Joseph Korbel School of International Studies. Another student applied for and received a grant to conduct an original survey with Esperanza International (<http://www.esperanzaint.org>) in the Dominican Republic on the extent to which micro-finance can mitigate forced labor. Moreover, in fall 2013 my class on human rights and modern day slavery (<http://livinglearning.richmond.edu/ssir/slavery/index.html>) visited the Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, to attend the first annual conference held by Historians Against Slavery (<http://historiansagainstsavery.org/conference.htm>). I anticipate that this experience will inspire some of these students to find creative ways to research contemporary slavery this summer. It is a mutually reinforcing cycle—the teaching of course content motivates students to go out and conduct original research and then return to the classroom to share what they have learned with their peers.

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Lessons Learned

The first lesson I have learned in using CBL is the importance of identifying the unique strengths of the surrounding community, even if those strengths are rooted in a traumatic history. In my case, the task has been to view contemporary slavery through the lens of the abolitionism of the past. Richmond, Virginia, where I live and teach, is a city still coming to terms with its legacy of being the capital of the Confederacy and the heart of the slave trade in the American South. Rather than look upon this as a badge of shame, I see this history as a powerful pedagogical tool. Accordingly, in the fall of 2013, for the class I teach on human rights and modern day slavery I scheduled a visit to Lumpkin's Jail, a few miles off campus, and a walk of the Slave Trail in downtown Richmond, where African-Americans were held against their will some 200 years ago. On a more substantive level, I hope to lead more community discussions in the future in which citizens of Richmond can rally around the fight against contemporary slavery and thus further heal its past. One step in that direction was co-hosting a community-wide forum on human rights in the fall of 2012 with the Douglass Wilder School of Public Policy at Virginia Commonwealth University—our larger, sister university in Richmond.

A second lesson I have learned is to build consensus slowly over time, rather than force the issues in which I am interested. Although no one in principle would object to developing a teaching and research agenda on contemporary slavery, the fact remains that many of my colleagues are very busy and are reluctant to take on additional academic endeavors. So I have followed a model of inviting a number of key figures on campus to a series of informal luncheons during which we ponder what a human-rights teaching and research agenda might look like in the years to come for the campus and community. I strive to create plenty of breathing room to allow for a diversity of opinions to be expressed, and to listen carefully to what people say, given the sensitive nature of the subject.

A third lesson is to give students a significant amount of responsibility and expect excellent results. This mindset goes a long way. For example, during spring 2013 along with colleagues Blake Stake and Bryan Figura I advised the freshmen Bonner Scholars at the University of Richmond as they developed a weeklong trip to Washington, D.C., to learn more about human trafficking. I let the Bonner Scholars do all the heavy lifting in planning the event. This gave them a sense of ownership and pride in developing their plan of action, as they organized trips to the non-governmental organization Free the Slaves (<https://www.freetheslaves.net/SSLPage.aspx>) and the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking In Persons (<http://www.state.gov/j/tip>). They returned from their trip empowered and ready to delve deeper into the subject in future classes.

Next Steps

I envision several next steps in the development of my teaching and research agenda on contemporary slavery. The first step is to continue a series of discussions on and off campus concerning where the work on human rights should be headed. We need more buy-in and consensus before institutionalizing any big changes, such as creating a major or minor on human rights. This may take at least several more years. Second, in the meantime, it is important to offer more classes on issues related to human rights as student demand for such courses grows substantially. Finally, it is important to be open to unexpected changes, given the fluidity of the contemporary anti-slavery movement. With high-tech giants like Microsoft and Google plunging into the antislavery discussion, national, regional, or even global attention on contemporary slavery may quicken in a manner that prior generations of activists could not foresee. We are at the beginning of something big.

From Globe Trotter to Global Citizen: Researching Human Rights Through International Programs

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During May and June of 2010, I spent a lot of time on Swiss trains. I was the visiting faculty member for Pepperdine University's summer study abroad program in Lausanne, which put me just a short train ride away from the United Nations Library in Geneva. I seized on this fortuitous geography both to dive back into my research on the global expansion of human rights and to invite a student along for the journey.

I had successfully applied for an internal grant to conduct a summer project with Elena Juarez, a Pepperdine political science student who was participating in the Lausanne program. I was interested in the role of global institutions in spreading human-rights discourse and practices to individual nations. As a comparative historical sociologist, I was also confident that the United Nations Library would be an excellent site for research. Before we left for Switzerland, I invited Elena to develop a rationale for which type of human rights to study and which country would provide a compelling case study. She chose the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the

Child and its implementation in Cameroon. That summer, we made the trek to Geneva together six times, and we have been invited to revise and resubmit the paper that resulted from our work for publication. As the project evolved, I learned two broad lessons about the benefits and challenges of researching human rights in the context of studying abroad.

Lesson #1: Careful planning and spontaneous exploration are equally valuable.

Among the greatest challenges of conducting research abroad, for undergraduates and seasoned scholars alike, are the realities that there are substantial time limits on the research and that it is not easy to return for further work. Thus important planning must be done prior to the trip to distinguish between what must be done on site and what can be done on the home campus. For our project, planning involved familiarizing ourselves with how to gain access to the library, search the catalogue, and request materials. While at the library, we prioritized our work by checking on whether an item was available online or through Pepperdine's library, and then taking copious notes and making copies of all other potentially relevant materials. The vast majority of the paper was written after we returned to California. Such strategic research decisions would be still more pressing—and possibly require even more planning—for different methodologies in which data collection or analysis must be done on site.

As with any trip, however, the value of sightseeing and detours cannot be overstated. The benefit of conducting research at the United Nations Library—aside from enjoying the beautiful marble building and watching peacocks roam the grounds—was the ability to wander through the collections of books, magazines, and conference proceedings. We took time to simply peruse the books stacked near where our materials were located, to see what other topics were shelved in close proximity to children's rights, international treaties, and Cameroon. The library had prepared guides to certain topics, which helped us understand how the United Nations staff might look at these topics from a different perspective. Taking the detours allowed us to discover more than we expected.

Lesson #2: Some things cannot be learned from the comforts of home.

There is much that we can teach our students about human rights through textbooks, lectures, and the World Wide Web. We can easily trace the historical development of human rights treaties, identify the actors involved with protecting rights, and discuss which factors improve or worsen the daily lives of individuals around the globe. Yet there are intangible lessons that can only be learned "on the ground." For my student and me, our view of the United Nations would have been cartoonish without seeing the endless rows of books and pouring over the detailed meeting proceedings. The bureaucracy of the U.N. would have been abstract without the hassle of applying for library access. We might have underestimated the gap between those charged with protecting human-rights and those needing protection if we had not eaten lunch in the cafeteria next to U.N. staff and delegates. In short, conducting research on human rights in this international context gave us an understanding of what the framework for protecting human rights looks like from the inside.

Yet for those of us interested in studying human rights, there is a still more valuable—albeit elusive—lesson that we hope to impart on our students: what it means to be a global citizen. Promoting human rights is a critical undertaking, but that challenge can also



Elena Juarez Theisner taking notes at the United Nations Library in Geneva.