

Heiskell Award Category: Special 2009 Category: Community College Study Abroad  
Name of Institution: Salt Lake Community College  
Name of Program: Vietnam Study Abroad Program

The Vietnam Study Abroad Program is a partnership between Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) and Children of Peace International (COPI), a non-profit humanitarian organization founded in 1993 by Binh Rybacki, Vietnamese refugee who came to the United States in 1975 with her family. After serving as a translator for a group of doctors traveling to Vietnam in 1993, Ms. Rybacki was moved by the many children living on the streets or working as prostitutes. Upon her return to the United States, she founded COPI as a means to help improve the lives of the children of Vietnam. "The children of Vietnam are those most in need of help in a country still recovering from many years of war. Children were the beginning and still are the primary focus for aid efforts of COPI" (COPI website).

Twice each year, COPI travels to Vietnam for two and half weeks with teams of American and Vietnamese medical and dental professionals and volunteers to deliver care to people in need in primarily poor rural areas. In 2003, Donna Thompson, SLCC Associate Professor of Nursing, joined one of the COPI trips to Vietnam as a volunteer medical professional. She was very impressed with her experience, the philosophy of the COPI program and the people of Vietnam, and felt this type of opportunity should be available to SLCC nursing students, faculty, and other interested parties.

Working closely with the SLCC Study Abroad Office, Ms. Thompson developed the Vietnam Study Abroad Program. In March 2004, ten students, with Ms. Thompson as the group leader, traveled to Vietnam with the COPI group. Every year since 2004, SLCC nursing students and faculty have traveled to Vietnam. A total of forty-three students have participated in the program.

The SLCC Nursing Program is a two-year program. Upon successful completion of the program, a student is entitled to an Associate of Applied Science degree, and may complete the exam for licensure as a registered nurse. Graduates from this program are in high demand, and the waiting list for entrance into the program is extensive.

While the curriculum for the SLCC Nursing Program is comprehensive preparing our students for a variety of roles such as providers and managers of care in acute, long term and community settings, it was felt the program could be strengthened by offering students the opportunity for international experience in settings where health care is sorely lacking or is rudimentary at best.

In addition, since 1975 approximately 12,000 Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants, many of them Vietnamese, have made their home in the State of Utah. Student volunteers who travel to Vietnam have the opportunity to see and experience the living conditions and learn about the culture from which their Vietnamese patients come.

This experience gives nursing students a chance to practice and utilize skills gained through their coursework and clinical experience. Also, they gain experience with birth defects such as hydrocephalus, cleft palate, progeria, microencephaly, and limb anomalies.

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Students increase their knowledge about diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, hepatitis, cholera, and typhoid fever. In addition, students visit and provide medical care at leprosy colonies. Learning about Vietnamese traditional and cultural medical practices is also important for students in order to provide comprehensive care in diverse settings.

Before leaving for Vietnam, students are required to attend four orientation sessions. At the first session students are given general information about the program, forms to complete, passport information, immunization requirements and course expectations. The second orientation session is a follow-up to the first session and additional information is given about the culture, language, and visa requirements. All participants who are in the SLCC Nursing Program must register for the Community or Pediatric Nursing clinical course. For those students not in the Nursing Program, independent study hours are arranged.

The third and fourth orientation sessions are information and working sessions where participants receive flight and in-country schedules and any other pertinent last minute details. The work consists of packing. All participants are allowed to take two suitcases, however, all students agree to pack one suitcase for personal items and reserve the second suitcase to carry supplies such as vitamins, analgesics, toys, clothing, etc., for the Vietnam program. Any item in tablet form must be counted, re-packaged in two-week dosages, and labeled. All supplies are donated by community members, pharmaceutical companies, churches, and civic groups.

A typical clinic day for the SLCC Vietnam Study Abroad Program begins with the volunteers arising very early and boarding a bus for a 2-3 hour ride to chosen locations. Locations vary from rural villages, orphanages, rural hospitals and youth shelters. During the two and half week stay, volunteers travel from Hanoi in the north to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in the south as well as many cities in between.

The volunteer teams set up triage, supply and examination stations for the first hour and then begin to see patients. Babies and children are seen first, followed by elders, and other adults. Students take turns staffing the triage stations directing patients to the appropriate care team. They also provide basic hygiene lessons, wound care, assist with small surgeries such as cyst removals, and dispensing medications.

The clinic days begin very early and end in the early evening. Patients begin lining up for the clinic before sunrise, and every person in line is seen. The volunteer teams may see up to 300 people in one day. Volunteers return to their hotel late in the evening, have dinner, and get to bed because they must get up early in the morning to start another round of clinics and patient care.

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During this study abroad, students are given time to experience the country of Vietnam. They go on sightseeing tours visiting temples and museums and other areas of interest. They also have time to shop and fill up the second suitcase, now empty of donated items, with souvenirs and mementos of their trip to Vietnam. The students, most of whom are not old enough to remember the Vietnam War, visit Ho Chi Minh City seeing and learning about the devastation of the war and its continuing effect on the Vietnamese people, economy, and environment.

SLCC students participating in the Vietnam Study Abroad Program greatly benefit from this experience. They come back with improved clinical skills, greater confidence in their nursing abilities, and the ability to relate to more diverse and multicultural populations. The comparison of health care availability in the United States to that of Vietnam is a sobering experience for these students, and they no longer take the access to health care for granted. Most importantly the students return to the United States with a deep appreciation for the freedoms they have having witnessed the strong communist presence in Vietnam.

For some students, it is their first opportunity to travel outside of the United States. For many students, this is the first opportunity they have had to participate in and appreciate the importance of humanitarian work. Students speak of the SLCC Study Abroad Program as “life changing” and “the opportunity of a life time.” Many express the desire to continue participation in humanitarian endeavors.

Finally, students pay out of pocket for this study abroad program which may total up to \$3,000. It is customary for the group leader’s trip to be included as part of the student’s total cost for the program. However, Ms. Donna Thompson pays her own way in order to keep the program cost as low as possible for the students. The SLCC Study Abroad Office also contributes by not charging administrative or overhead fees and further supports this program by paying for all printing and advertising for the program.

The contributions of Ms. Donna Thompson, SLCC students, the SLCC Study Abroad Office, community groups, and the partnership with Children of Peace International truly support the mission, “...to serve the people of Vietnam by developing the capability of the people to help themselves” (COPI website).