Research Collaboration via Web-based Technology between the University of Liberia (West Africa) and Ohio University Undergraduates: Best Practices in Microfinance.

Project Description

Using web-based communication technologies (intranet, video- and tele-conferencing) undergraduate students, teaching assistants, and faculty members from Ohio University’s Global Leadership Center (OU/GLC) partner with undergraduate students and faculty from the University of Liberia’s nascent Microfinance Training Program (UL/MFTP) to conduct collaborative research on microfinance-lending best-practices. The project especially focuses on the unique circumstances and context of Liberia’s post-conflict reconstruction. Resource-poor UL/MFTP students (who will one day work for USAID, the World Bank, Red Cross, etc.) gain access to the most current and relevant research on microfinance lending; OU/GLC students gain otherwise unavailable access to the microfinance lending front line in Africa.

Liberia, a small country along the West African coast, has embarked on a journey of reconstruction and national renewal following a horrendous civil conflict. The 14-year conflict which ended in 2005 left nearly every social and physical infrastructure in the country destroyed – including higher education infrastructure. Nothing speaks more eloquently to this than the fact that Liberia continues to be ranked among 10 lowest in the UN Human Development Reports. Despite this, Liberia has made major strides over the last two years in reconstructing its physical infrastructure – including the higher education infrastructure. However, the country is starkly challenged with reformulating its human capital.

With the civil war in Liberia now a (lingering) memory, the University of Liberia is currently resuming academic activities. Reconstruction works are ongoing. New programs to address the unfolding socio-economic realities facing Liberia are being developed. One such program is the Microfinance Training Program. This certificate program is being offered to develop a human resource that is prepared to serve as a catalyst for Liberia’s post-war development agenda. However, such development is not without challenge.

The university, while maintaining its teaching mission, has been unable to revive its research mission since the end of the civil conflict in 2005. This situation has affected the innovative learning process the university has hoped for since its re-opening. The faculty has not been able to provide adequate hands-on training applicable to real world problems to the students due to the acute shortage of teaching and other academic resources. Towards this end, The Global Leadership Center at Ohio University has initiated a collaborative interactive learning project with the University of Liberia Business College (Microfinance Training Program Certificate) on poverty and microfinance.
Students at The Global Leadership Center at Ohio University, with their technological leverage, research microfinance performances in other African countries and transmit their findings to the University of Liberia, where the students in its (University of Liberia) Microfinance Training review and rework them to fit the Liberian context, all the while providing feedback to GLC students. This project dovetails with The Global Leadership Center's vision “to develop internationally-minded, locally-engaged leaders in all walks of life.”

Objectives

- To contribute to educational reform in Liberia by building a sustainable interactive collaborative research project for students with The University of Liberia Business College and The Ohio University Global Leadership Center;
- To apprise OU/GLC students about the relative strengths and weaknesses of microfinance lending, especially in the West African context;
- To promote civic engagement among both Liberian and American students;
- To strengthen higher education connections between Africa and the United States;
- To make the work of the University of Liberia and The Ohio University Global Leadership Center more relevant to the reconstruction and development of Liberia in particular and developing countries in general.

Implementation

The collaboration between The Global Leadership Center at Ohio University and the University Of Liberia College of Business is based on the provision of problem- and project-based interactive, team-based learning for the students of the two institutions. The project encompasses one term (i.e. one semester in the case of the University of Liberia and one quarter in the case of Ohio University) in each academic year. The overall focus of the project is poverty reduction and sustainable development (e.g. the use of microfinance in poverty reduction).

Students of the two institutions work together in teams. Their work is done through the use of distance learning facilities such as tele-/video-conferencing, emails and courier services. Faculty from the two institutions are responsible for guiding the process of research and learning for the students.
Innovative Approach

The Global Leadership Center offers a two-year undergraduate certificate that prepares students to become lifelong learners in order to serve as internationally-minded, skilled, attuned, professional, and experienced leaders in all walks of life (commercial, governmental and nongovernmental, educational, etc.). The GLC certificate is not a degree-granting academic discipline but a curricular and co-curricular certificate program which enhances other disciplines.

The program prepares students to think critically and creatively, communicate clearly and logically, be flexible and non-dogmatic, embrace ambiguity and complexity, and understand the world's challenging commercial, political, religious, and cultural issues.

Global Leadership Center courses are not traditional classes with lectures, tests, and papers. Instead, students work in project teams on real-world problems and issues. The project-based action-learning approach challenges students to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to work in a rapidly changing world. The GLC’s core program consists of project-learning units, which spring from global issues. Each project challenges students to determine what they need to know to solve the problem, how they are going to find the information they need, and how they are going to apply it. Project-based learning also changes the role of faculty members; rather than providing the students with specific course content, faculty advise, consult and provide constant feedback on all aspects of a project, from research and analysis to report writing and presentations.

To complete the program and receive the GLC certificate students must take eight (30 credit hours) GLC classes (projects), participate in an international GLC trip during the first 3 weeks of “winter break,” and successfully complete a second international experience, e.g., an international internship or study abroad program. Classes consist of project-based learning. These projects are designed to give students experience in international affairs. Students are also required to complete two years of a foreign language. The GLC certificate program is open to all majors.