Encuentro Dominicano:
Education for Transformation

By Thomas M. Kelly, Ph.D., and Justin Lampe, M.A.
It is not always easy living and studying in the Dominican Republic. Our students will tell you this without hesitation. At the same time, they will also tell you that they have grown and changed in ways they never expected. When you see people suffering from easily preventable and treatable diseases, massive systemic injustice, widespread unemployment and underemployment and living conditions that most only see on infomercials for international charities, you are going to change and change drastically.

Encuentro Dominicano is Creighton’s study abroad program in the Dominican Republic. Students are housed at the Centro para Educacion y Salud Integral (Center for Latin American Concern, ILAC). In their four months here, students take 15 hours of coursework, immerse themselves in local communities for nearly three weeks, and volunteer twice a week in Santiago. The program is a mix between the traditional approach to study abroad (living together, studying and traveling) and an immersion component that puts students in direct and prolonged contact with communities that survive on subsistence farming and occasional outside employment. ILAC has built relationships in these communities, called “campos,” for more than 30 years, and Creighton students have the opportunity and privilege to experience and understand life in the Third World in a unique way. Encuentro Dominicano has three main priorities that flow through all its programming and coursework: to make concrete connections between academic learning and direct experience; to reveal the complexity and responsibility of living in a global community; and to integrate this new knowledge and experience in a spirituality of faith and justice.

Connections
It is one thing to study the reign of the late Dominican dictator Raphael Trujillo — it is another to listen to a Dominican campesino reminisce about times when things got done because someone was in charge. It surprises many of our students when typical Dominicans communicate a preference for a dictatorship over a democracy, a development that is becoming more and more common in Latin America. It is one thing to study about “machismo” — the cultural dominance of men in Latin America, and another to experience it while on immersion in one of the campos. It is one thing to study Haitian immigration to the Dominican Republic and listen to representatives of the Jesuit Refugee Service document human rights abuses — it is another to see a Dominican border guard quietly put away his whip as the students arrive at the bridge that separates Haiti from the DR.
Students encounter situations that require them to synthesize and integrate their new knowledge, cultural understanding and personal reflection in real time. Can or will students confront these issues beyond the structured classroom setting? Will students recognize that newly befriended Dominicans are treated differently than themselves when they are out dancing Merengue, Salsa and Bachata? Will they confront the machismo they experience in the campo? We hope that through many hours of preparation and course work, students are well prepared to handle real situations that might conflict with their individual ethics and past cultural experience. While traditional academic learning is invaluable in our culture, it is its connection to the real world that Encuentro Dominicano emphasizes.

Opening students to experiential learning and drawing them away from the comforts and normalcy of the traditional university setting can be a cause for disturbance and frustration. Students can begin building the knowledge base they need to be successful in the classroom through experience and travel opportunities well in advance of class discussions. This can be a cause of frustration for students who have grown accustomed to simply cramming for exams, or reading enough to solely get through the next class session before heading back to their campus apartment to play Xbox. Yet, grounding the program in real-life learning is essential if we intend for our students to learn about the poverty they will inevitably encounter in the context of the Dominican Republic.

A central aspect of the program is how students learn about poverty. We can study statistics (and we do), we can see flowcharts on unemployment, we can hear about the struggles of those in poverty — but until we experience the lives of those who live in poverty (even as a visitor) our knowledge is incomplete. Mari Depenbusch, a senior theology major, saw her “little sister” in the campo suffer from an infection for seven days because the family could neither afford the cost of medicine nor the transportation to a pharmacy. Arin Guschewsky, a junior business major, watched her “father” suffer from simple ailments that could have been remedied back in Santiago without a second thought. Students witnessed children throughout the campo drinking un sanitary water, which caused parasites and worse, simply because they didn’t know better. John Gervich, a junior political science major, and Andy Gobel, a senior creative writing major, worked on farms with their host parents, sweaty and exhausted at the end of the day — they knew their “fathers” had worked all day for the equivalent of $6.

When we meet with every community prior to our students’ immersion, we emphasize that they — the community — are the teachers of their way of life — and if they welcome a student like a member of the family, they can teach some invaluable lessons. Students help cook, do laundry, care for animals and share meals with their families. Others work on farms planting corn, picking yucca and carting bananas. Some pre-med students accompany rural physicians as they serve those with little or no access to decent health care. Some bathe with buckets of water and most go to sleep at 7 p.m. because there is no electricity. Slowly, slowly, they begin to realize what poverty really is. Poverty is not so much the lack of iPods and air conditioning, but rather one’s vulnerability, in all aspects of life, which comes from a complex set of factors beyond the grasp or control of those who suffer. This vulnerability cannot be taught in a classroom, but it can be briefly glimpsed in the campo.

Prior to our departure from the campo, one student asked me to drive to the pharmacy (six miles away) to buy some cold medicine. I asked, “What would a campesino do if they had what you have now?” He said, “They would lie down and wait to get better.” I said, “Have a nice rest.”

Global Complexity
Upon their arrival in Santiago and settling in at their new home, the ILAC Center, the students have a difficult time understanding Dominican reality. “Why don’t people work here?” Their first response: “If they just try hard, it will pay off, and they can climb the economic ladder.” This, of course, presupposes a reality where success is
Breaking through preconceived notions brought by North American students to another country is often one of the great challenges of educating in a Third World context.

What difference does it make that this country was conquered by Spanish, French, American and Haitian forces and that an oligarchy has always dominated social, cultural, political and economic life? Can those on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder think in terms of upward mobility? Is our perspective that “if people simply work hard, they will succeed” a product of our own cultural upbringing that does not translate into other contexts? What psychic barriers exist in a country where the wealthy have always controlled access to opportunity and possibilities of improvement?

Poverty is not so much the lack of iPods and air conditioning, but rather one’s vulnerability, in all aspects of life, which comes from a complex set of factors beyond the grasp or control of those who suffer. This vulnerability cannot be taught in a classroom, but it can be briefly glimpsed in the campo.

Soon, students learn that reality is very complex. Campesinos work hard in their fields but cannot compete with dairy and corn products from the heavily subsidized and highly technical U.S. market. Electricity is expensive and never steady because of government corruption that results in much electricity being stolen. “Why don’t companies take better care of their workers?” Business students learn here, through “internships” with major multinational companies, that such a question is very complicated. Some companies refuse to pay more in salary and benefits because if they do, buyers will simply go to factories in China or Honduras and buy the exact same product for much less. What students are confronted by is an increasingly complex world where subsidies in the U.S. or lack of workers’ rights in China directly affects the standard of living in the Dominican Republic.

Providing both the intellectual and experiential components of understanding a complex global reality is central to the goals of Encuentro Dominicano — and much easier said than done. What is certain is that First World responses to seemingly simple problems are almost never sufficient. Often what is necessary is to delay judgment and try to understand multiple dimensions, both proximate and distant, to a given problem. This “delay” is often frustrating for First World “problem-solvers,” those for whom problems have always been fairly easy to both understand and fix.

Faith and Justice

In a talk given at Santa Clara University in 2000, the Very Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., superior general of the Society of Jesus, proposed that these two deliberately open words — faith and justice — may be interpreted as meaning respectively, “the service of faith … [by bringing] the counter-cultural gift of Christ to the world,” and the “justice of the Gospel which embodies God’s love and saving mercy.” Kolvenbach emphasizes Ignatius’ desire to combine words with deeds. Social action in the name of the justice of the Gospel must be combined, he proposes, with much analysis and reflection. He adds that the promotion of justice needs to combine academic rigor with social activism.

In applying these principles to contemporary higher education in

...
well. We understand that students come to us from varied belief backgrounds, but we insist that there be a spiritual dimension to personal development and experiential learning — in fact, it is essential. One of the key texts in the core course is *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, by the Rev. Dean Brackley, S.J., an author and educator at the University of Central America. In it, Brackley writes: “I do know that the world needs a critical mass of people who will respond to suffering, who are ready to make a long-term commitment, and who will make wise choices along the way. Without such ‘new human beings,’ I doubt any amount of money, sophisticated strategies or even structural change will make our world much more human. … Sustaining a life of generous service requires a spirituality.”

What does this mean for a program emerging from a University that is both Catholic and Jesuit? We propose that “to live means to seek and find God everywhere, in order to collaborate with God in service to others.” Part of this “everywhere” is, of course, in the world in which we find ourselves. Another part is through the relationships that form and sustain us, and yet still another part is in God’s movement in our heart and soul, while we are buffeted by the challenges and suffering in this world. This is why, following each immersion, we “retreat” as a group for two days to discern how to integrate our experience into a vision for our life that may challenge deeply held presuppositions and beliefs. This integrating aspect of the program is essential if the knowledge gained and the experiences lived are to mean anything in the future. As Brackley writes, “Responding to massive injustice according to each one’s calling is the price of being human and Christian today. Those looking for a privatized spirituality to shelter them from a violent world have come to the wrong place.”

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, *Encuentro Dominicano* will only be successful if our students make choices and commitments in the future that distinguish them from a world where material accumulation, self-interest and individualism reign supreme. We hope that exposure to a Third World reality will open hearts and eyes to the responsibility that we have to care for others — especially the “least among us.” That responsibility can and should take varying forms — business leaders who care about more than simply the bottom line, teachers who truly want to form and develop students, doctors who connect with their patients in their own language, government and civic leaders who have a preferential option for the common good over self-advancement. Will we be successful? Only time will tell. In the meantime, we do everything we can here in the Dominican Republic to teach students how 70 percent of the world lives day to day. We hope they leave us looking forward to a life for and with others.
About the authors:
Thomas M. Kelly, Ph.D., is the academic director of Encuentro Dominicano; Justin Lampe is the student life coordinator of Encuentro Dominicano. Both live and work in the Dominican Republic.

Kelly with his wife, Lisa, and children, Michael (9), Andrew (11) and Catherine (4). Lampe with residents of Sabana Rey Latina.

Encuentro Dominicano

This semester-long study abroad program in the Dominican Republic is open to undergraduate students in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences and Business Administration and the School of Nursing.

Professor Kelly teaches the six-credit-hour core course titled Social Justice in the Dominican Republic: History, Sociology and Economics in Caribbean Context. Visiting professors from Creighton’s various colleges and schools teach intensive three-week courses (three are offered each semester), and a Dominican teaches Spanish.

Students live at the ILAC Center in Santiago, except during their immersion experiences — when they live with Dominican families in the rural campos. Some of the service opportunities in which students partake include working with children at local orphanages and assisting the elderly poor.

At right, from top to bottom, Jacob Priluck rides a mule with his host brother in La Guamita; Arin Guschewsky with her host mom in La Guamita; Dirks with a child in Sabana Rey Latina; participants in the fall 2005 Encuentro Dominicano with the Kelly children in Puerto Plata.