Community Service Learning: When a Global Crisis Presents a Local Need

Dina Skias, Director, Odyssey in Athens Study Abroad Program, Webster University Athens Campus
Amanda Ingabire, Student in Biological Sciences and Athens study abroad student in Summer of 2016, Webster University

Abstract

For nearly two years, an unprecedented wave of refugees has been crossing the Mediterranean into Europe. One of the cities that found itself playing host to these people in need is Athens, Greece. Webster University Athens Campus students, staff, and faculty stepped in to help through a community service learning course that is providing our students with skills and experiences they could not have imagined as they make a difference in the life of these refugees.

How our students have helped
- Serving hot meals daily to up to 400 refugee men, women, and children at Caritas Refugee Center
- Assisting in meaningful play with refugee children
- Teaching English to men, women, and children
- Engaging in meaningful play with refugee children
- Assisting social services with issuance of monthly cards and research
- Fundraising and helping to coordinate a holiday party for refugee children
- Collecting food and supplies for refugee camps and squats
- Preparing sandwiches and delivering to refugee camps

What students have learned

“Volunteering throughout this past semester has been one of the highlights of my study abroad experience. While working with various agencies throughout the city I have been able to learn more about the refugee crisis, the economic crisis, and different environmental problems in the country. This has been a once in a lifetime experience that I would highly recommend to any future study abroad students. Before I started working at Caritas I thought I knew a lot about the refugee crisis. This experience taught me though that while I did know the main details (i.e. the refugees were coming from Syria because of the ongoing civil war) I did not know the everyday problems that arise when you are a refugee. I did not once really stop and ponder where they were getting their clothing from, their meals, or even where they showered. Volunteering at Caritas has shown me that there is so much behind the scenes work done by amazing workers and volunteers that will never be publically recognized.” Jennifer Whit, International Relations student, Webster University.

Class requirements
- Providing 48 hours of service
- Writing a reflective journal entry after each service
- Discussing journal entries and relating what they have learned in class
- Writing two page summary of entire experience
- Completing Confidentiality Clause and Waiver of Liability Form
- Participating in service projects throughout the semester

Current situation of refugee crisis in Greece from UNHCR:

“All of us as global citizens have a responsibility to take care of the ones who need help. I think working in such cases would be beneficial to everyone and it definitely gives a better perspective in life and helps you view what the most important things are, and I think because this course puts you in these situations with many different kinds of people, it can help break prejudices and is a good reminder that although we all come from different backgrounds and cultures, at the end of the day we are all human and we all deserve to be treated equally.” Kimberly DeLaCruz, Communications student, Webster Athens.

“Increasing numbers of refugees and migrants take their chances aboard unseaworthy boats and dinghies in a desperate bid to reach Europe. The vast majority of those attempting this dangerous crossing are in need of international protection fleeing violence and persecution in their country of origin. Every year these movements continue to exact a devastating toll on human life.” UNHCR 2016