

Teaching Caselettes

KAKAMEGA, KENYA

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An American student working for an American volunteer-based organization in Kenya must decide how best to allocate the funds she has raised for her project: use a portion toward helping an individual girl with a skin pigmentation disorder or employ them solely toward her plan to produce and supply reusable sanitary pads to disadvantaged schoolgirls in the region.

This case illustrates the tensions and dilemmas students will likely face at their civic engagement sites between balancing the needs of individuals against those of the community and between short- and long-term goals. The case also prompts students to reflect on their obligations to donors who have contributed funds to particular projects with the understanding that they will be used in specific ways.

Please refer to the “Ethics of Engagement” overview at the end of this document to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework this case was created to illustrate.

The case text and teaching notes for this teaching caselette were completed under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Dunning, The Kenan Institute for Ethics.

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Sarah is in Kakamega, Kenya, working as a summer intern for the Foundation for Sustainable Development, an American volunteer-based organization focusing on international development. Sarah is placed with the African Education Society (pseudonym, AES), a local non-governmental organization which sustains nine schools in the municipality. During her stay, Sarah has witnessed how girls in these schools often miss class each month during their menstrual cycles. This places them at a significant academic disadvantage. To address this problem, and its source—the lack of sanitary supplies—Sarah implements a project to produce reusable sanitary pads for disadvantaged schoolgirls in and around Kakamega.

During the pad-making workshops, Sarah notices one girl who is always the first to offer help, to ask a question, or to give Sarah or one of Sarah's colleagues a chair. Sarah likes this girl and wants to involve her more in the work of the project. One day during a lunch break, the girl draws Sarah aside to talk in private. After they enter another room, the girl shows Sarah a white rash on her thigh and tells her about constant pain in her leg and chest and her deteriorating eyesight. Sarah, whose family works with an AIDS non-profit, worries that the girl has AIDS. Sarah feels responsible for the girl and offers to accompany her to the AES doctor. The girl reluctantly agrees to go.

At the doctor's office, the pigmentation condition turns out not to be a symptom of AIDS, but rather a case of vitiligo (a chronic, but non-life-threatening disorder that causes de-pigmentation of the skin). Though no longer a possible life-and-death situation, the diagnosis still has significant social implications for the girl's future livelihood, as Kenyans attach stigmas to one's skin color and outward appearance. The AES doctor says he can supply a treatment at a cost of \$1000. Indeed, he seems to take for granted that Sarah will pay for the treatment. Sarah faces the difficult choice of using part of the money she has already raised for her project to treat the girl.

Overview of Ethics of Engagement Case Studies

These case studies were developed as part of a workshop series the Kenan Institute for Ethics provided for students preparing for intensive civic engagement experiences. The goals for the summer experience were three-fold: to gain self-knowledge, to deepen students' commitment to life-long civic engagement, and to help the communities in which they lived and worked for the summer. Student projects took place in local and global locations, ranging from working with African immigrants in Ireland, to documenting social change movements in South Africa, to managing environmental organizations in Portland, Oregon.

The cases are based on actual student experiences in the field. They set forward the ethical dilemmas the students faced on personal, organizational, and systemic levels. They also present scenarios in which there is no clear right answer. Rather, the students in each case study are challenged by seemingly intractable problems for which there seem to be only wrong and perhaps less wrong solutions.

In constructing the teaching notes, we referred to the "Right-Right Dilemmas" paradigm drawn from Rush Kidder's book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. We modified this concept, suggesting that the students will likely face "Wrong-Wrong Dilemmas" in their summer placements, in which both the community and individual goods are compromised; neither loyalty nor truth can be fully achieved; long-term and short-term prospects are equally pessimistic; and neither justice nor mercy can be experienced by all those affected by the dilemma.

In the workshop, we also introduced the students to three "Resolution Principles," which we offered as frameworks to enable clear thinking about ethical dilemmas. These principles are the classical ethical principles of

Utilitarianism - providing the greatest good for the greatest number

Deontology / Principle-Based (Kantianism) - following the highest principle as absolutely as possible

Care-Based - emphasizing the importance of relationships and paying attention to the particular context and individuals involved

After reading the cases, students in the workshop were divided into small groups to discuss the questions listed in the teaching notes and then returned to the large group for a facilitator-led discussion. Given the significance and difficulty of the tensions faced by the characters in the cases, a good session often ended with significant debate, rather than consensus about a right course of action.

Our aim with these cases is to provide students preparing for civic engagement experiences with tools they will find helpful as they face morally serious dilemmas in real-world contexts radically different than those in a university setting.