

Teaching Notes

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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Issue: An American student at a civic engagement site in Kakamega, Kenya, has to decide how best to allocate the funds she has raised for her project: use a portion toward helping an individual girl with vitiligo or employ them solely toward her plan to produce and supply reusable sanitary pads to disadvantaged schoolgirls in the region.

This case illustrates several ethical dilemmas students involved in civic engagement work may face, including the classic Right-Right Dilemmas of individual versus community and short- versus long-term goals. The questions below are designed to facilitate class discussion.

1. *What ethical dilemmas does Sarah face?*

Individual versus Community:

- The individual girl's need for financial assistance and the schoolgirls' need for a sustainable supply of reusable sanitary pads, the latter achievable only through significant funding.
- Sarah's feeling of responsibility to the one girl and her hope to be accountable to her donors and the other girls working in the same workshop.

Short-term versus Long-term:

- Helping the girl now while Sarah has the financial means to do so versus not wanting to engender expectations that foreigners will fund treatment for individual medical problems.

2. *How would you respond to this situation? Use the Resolution Principles (utilitarianism, deontology/principle-based, care-based) to justify your response. Possible responses include:*

- A utilitarian approach suggests that Sarah renders the greatest good by refusing to fund treatment for the individual girl. It seems more important that the greatest good be provided to the greatest number of girls in the local community.
- A deontological approach would support not helping the individual girl because this would not respect the duty and obligations Sarah should hold to her donors.
- A care-based approach would emphasize the relationship that Sarah has built with the girl and the responsibility that Sarah now has to care for her.

3. *How would your solution to Sarah's dilemma, and the Resolution Principle underlying it, have changed if the facts of the case were altered, as follows:*

- a. The girl had a life-threatening illness.
- b. The girl's parents and the village leaders had appealed for Sarah's help?
- c. Sarah found out that the girl had a history of asking foreigners for money?

4. *By refusing to provide aid to the individual girl, Sarah could be said to be acting in defiance of the "giving" or "dependence" culture to which short-term volunteers may be accused of contributing. This view is held by those who believe that change in developing countries can only come about organically, either as a result of local grassroots movements or strong political will and direction. For truly sustainable civic engagement, this argument goes, short-term volunteers should first and foremost realize that they have to work with locals and not take the stance that they are providing for them. Is this a reasonable approach to take for short-term (several-weeks long) civic engagement projects, or is it simply too much to ask for this form of engagement?*

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.