

LA CARPIO, COSTA RICA

Compromise

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A student working in La Carpio, a Costa Rican slum, faces pressure from a local church congregation doing charity work in the same area. The student must decide how to respond to the disruption that members of the congregation are causing to her own work at the local community center, without jeopardizing the charitable congregation's presence in the area and the long-term benefits it brings to the residents of La Carpio.

This case showcases a potent dilemma for civic engagement volunteers: students' positions as short-term (eight-week) volunteers can conflict with long-term plans for development in the local communities. While students can be eager to "make a difference," compromises often have to be made between the students' ideal plans and on-the-ground realities. The case also points to the critical importance of adequate preparation in any civic engagement work, not only in terms of understanding the local community and community partner, but also realizing that there may be other non-profit organizations in the same region.

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

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Bonnie is spending her summer civic engagement internship in La Carpio, Costa Rica. La Carpio is a large slum outside of San Jose, and it is comprised primarily of illegal Nicaraguan immigrants. Most of these immigrants do not have the proper identification papers that allow them to be legally employed. Often, they work in construction and housekeeping, receiving approximately a third of what equally qualified, legal Costa Ricans are paid. Bonnie's local community partner is the Costa Rican Foundation (pseudonym, CRF). The CRF runs community centers in La Carpio that serve as supplementary education and day care centers for children who would otherwise be left alone when their parents go to work. The CRF runs community centers in La Carpio that serve as supplementary education and day care centers for children who would otherwise be left alone when their parents go to work. The CRF also runs support groups for women, offers microfinance opportunities, and has a clinic to address basic medical needs.

One primary area of Bonnie's work in La Carpio is to improve the education programs being offered for children in the community centers. Women in the local community run these programs, and CRF offers ideas and funding. Bonnie decides to create a new program on interpersonal relationships, a social skills class that teaches children how to treat others in a respectful way. This new class is part of a broader goal to bring more order to the classroom and establish a routine to which the children can adhere.

One morning, shortly after the full implementation of the social skills program, the children are sitting in a circle singing songs when around 15 high school students walking on the road by the building begin calling for the children. The children rush out of the class to see the students and to receive balloon swords that the high-schoolers are distributing. Bonnie is annoyed with the situation for several reasons. Not only have these students disrupted what little semblance of classroom order Bonnie has painstakingly tried to achieve, but the gifts that the group is distributing are incongruent with the message of non-violence that Bonnie's program carries.

Bonnie finds out that the older students are part of an evangelical church congregation that meets nearby. They want the young children to follow them to their church. Bonnie is against this idea. She approaches the evangelical minister who is leading the group and starts a conversation, which quickly escalates into a heated argument. The minister notes that Bonnie has only spent six months working in Costa Rica while he, in contrast, has been working with the local church for the past four years. Bonnie asks the group to avoid the road when classes are in session; the minister counters by asking Bonnie if she would rather the evangelical group never come down the road again. Bonnie is intimidated and uncertain as to whether she has the authority to make any decision. The confrontation ends on an unresolved note. In the following days, after talking to the local women working at the community center, Bonnie starts to understand that this evangelical church has done many good things for the La Carpio community.