

Teaching Notes

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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Issue: This case showcases a potent dilemma for short-term civic engagement volunteers: students' positions as short-term (eight-week) volunteers can conflict with long-term plans for development in the local communities. The questions below are designed to facilitate class discussion.

1. *What are the challenges to acting ethically in this case?*

Bonnie, in her capacity as a short-term volunteer, does not have a significant voice in influencing how aid work is done in La Carpio. Even if she does act against the congregation's methods, her action could be viewed as unethical because of the likelihood of a negative long-term impact on the community. Simply due to the nature of her position, Bonnie has an incomplete understanding of affairs in the community and her work is marginal and temporary. Ethical dilemmas on a personal, transitory level may arguably be of minimal concern when larger organizational and systemic forces are at play.

2. *Can you identify any ethical dilemmas confronting Bonnie?*

Short-term versus Long-term

- Bonnie's temporary involvement with the La Carpio community and the more long-term system of aid work in the slum.

Individual versus Community

- Bonnie's personal desire to "make a difference" through her social skills class and the evangelical congregation's wish to offer aid in their own way.
- Bonnie's desire to confront the abrasive methods employed by the evangelical group and the community's need for aid from all available charitable organizations.

3. *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 would suggest that Bonnie renders the greatest good by compromising with the evangelical congregation. If the congregation continues to be insistent in their current methods, Bonnie would have to adapt her class schedule to avoid confrontation with the evangelists.
- A deontological approach would support not giving in to the arguably bullying methods employed by the evangelical minister, since this would not respect the duty and obligation Bonnie should hold to the CRF and the children at the community center. This approach would be especially relevant if compromising class timings can lead to other inconveniences, e.g. the current time slot for Bonnie's class is the only feasible one.
- A care-based approach could go both ways. Emphasizing the relationships Bonnie has built with the children at the community center, Bonnie can either insist on continuing her classes the way they are, acknowledging the importance of a social skills curriculum, or compromise to secure the long-term presence of the evangelical group in the area, even if it brings inconvenience.

4. *What steps can be taken to avoid or resolve the uncomfortable situation Bonnie faces? (Think through personal, organizational and systemic methods.)*

Bonnie faces the uncomfortable position of being both an outsider and a temporary resident in La Carpio. Both of these limit her ability to fully understand and engage with the community. The following are a few possible actions that could be taken to avoid or resolve a situation similar to the one Bonnie faces:

- On a personal level, there must be a greater breadth of preparation. Students should be prepared to meet and interact with the entire multitude of residents at the civic engagement site, be it community partners, locals, or in this case, skeptics from other aid groups.
- Organizations like the CRF should prepare their interns for realistic on-the-ground interactions with community members, particularly skeptics. In addition, touching base with other non-profit organizations as organized aid groups would lend more heft to their individual volunteers.
- Systemically, structures for aid in impoverished communities often lack direction and organization, with many aid groups becoming competitors rather than collaborators, inducing inefficient use of limited resources. Communication networks should be built up, either with the help of strong political will (despite many of these organizations being of a non-government nature) or via grassroots networking, as different organizations meet and exchange ideas.

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.