

Andrew Heiskell Awards for Innovation in International Education 2005-2006 Nomination

Heiskell Award Category: Study Abroad

Name of Institution: **The University of St. Thomas**, a founding member of the **Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA)**

Name of Program: **Community and Development in Bangladesh**

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http://www.hecua.org/j_bangladesh.htm

Summary of Program (50-100 words):

Bangladesh has long been a focus for the testing and implementation of models of development by international agencies, governmental organizations, and NGOs. In this month-long January program, students meet development theorists and practitioners, and do field study with the intended beneficiaries of development programs. Through theoretical inquiry and structured experiential learning, students compare the development discourses of experts and urban elites with understandings of development and social change held by the materially poor. Together with Bangladeshi students, U.S. participants explore ideologies, policies, and practices of socioeconomic development in rural and urban Bangladesh in lectures, discussions, and field study.

Community and Development in Bangladesh

January Term Study Abroad Program

**The University of St. Thomas and
Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA)
St. Paul, Minnesota**

Why Bangladesh? Why now?

Today more than ever, a chasm gapes between the global North and the global South, between “the West and the rest,” to use Samuel Huntington’s troubling phrase. More than ever, young people with relative wealth and power must understand that their advantages bring responsibility, and international education must provide these students with strategies for rejecting guilt, pity, or ignorance, and for embracing the challenge of global citizenship to act for change.

With more than two thousand people per square mile and a per capita income of U.S. \$210, Bangladesh is very different from most of the United States. While it is 85% rural and agrarian, Bangladesh is also an ecologically vulnerable area undergoing rapid urbanization (the capital Dhaka’s population of ten million is expected to double by 2015). Bangladesh’s poverty, unemployment, overpopulation, illiteracy, malnutrition, high infant mortality, and poor housing and sanitation represent enormous human need that has spurred decades of extensive development effort. Many international organizations and a number of Bangladeshi non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have experimented with a variety of assistance strategies “with a considerable measure of success in humanitarian terms” (Maloney, *Voluntary Organizations in Development in South Asia*). These strategies have included extending micro-credit to poor women, empowering women by educating girls, and providing assistance to rural artisans and keepers of livestock and fisheries. Despite intensive help from without, and dynamic and dedicated organizations within, Bangladesh remains poor, and provides a site for the study of the persistence of poverty in the face of a wide variety of development strategies employed by state and non-state agents.

Because of its cultural and political status as a moderate secular Islamic state, Bangladesh also offers an ideal location for students to increase their understanding of the growing role of Islam in world politics and in individual communities.

Audience, structure, and locations

Now in its fifth year, **Community and Development in Bangladesh** serves students at the seventeen member colleges and universities in the **Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs** as well as students from non-member schools. **Community and Development in Bangladesh** offers the opportunity to spend a month in one of the world’s most populous and most materially poor countries and to learn firsthand from development workers and recipients. In Dhaka, students hear directly from policymakers, bankers, international development experts, and academicians about what can and should be done to reduce rural and urban poverty in Bangladesh. In a Dhaka slum and in rural Comilla and Bogra, students also meet the very poor. Interacting with people whose aspirations may be different from those of the experts, students appreciate the existential

challenges faced by the poor, and also develop a critical awareness of the theoretical and practical challenges to development programs. The students meet urban migrants and rural villagers whose goals derive from or are articulated through Islam, feminism, environmentalism, regionalism, and other organized groups and ideologies. Students are invited to consider how these hopes for change mesh with what they have heard from experts, and how the dreams of poor and educated elite Bangladeshis may link up with dreams for change and community across the globe.

During a portion of the course that takes place in Dhaka, students in the program are provided with a general orientation to the culture and religious traditions of Bangladesh, a nation whose existence derives from the skewed positions of Hindu and Muslim under colonialism, but which today is a secular state with eighty percent of the population practicing Islam. In the early part of the course, students learn about community development strategies that international agencies and domestic NGOs have pioneered in Bangladesh. Grappling with theories of social change, students investigate their own complex relationships to the objects of their study, and consider their obligations to and possibilities for global citizenship.

Innovation: native and visitor experience culture shock, learn together

Community and Development in Bangladesh is especially innovative in that U.S. students work with Bangladeshi students to learn about urban and rural poverty in Bangladesh. After a week in Dhaka, students join a group of Bangladeshi students from the Independent University of Bangladesh (IUB) to conduct field studies in a rural area. The IUB students are there in an IUB program called "Live-in-Field Experience," which sends urban students into the rural villages and urban settlements to familiarize them with the socio-economic realities faced by the majority of Bangladeshis. U.S. students and Bangladeshi students live together in dormitories, conduct joint work at the internationally known Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), and spend at least one night in villagers' homes. Readings and lectures in the program are in English, and at BARD and in the field and villages, the IUB students team with U.S. students, not merely to provide translation between Bangla language and English, but also to collaborate in shaping the process of interviewing rural Bangladeshis about the ecological, economic, and political problems they face. One explicit goal during fieldwork is for both sets of students to test what they have heard from development practitioners against what they hear from rural villagers, the intended beneficiaries of development work.

That the field experiences are new and challenging for both the U.S. students and for the Bangladeshi students alike allows for yet other kinds of dialogue, in which the U.S. students can learn about how members of the urban elite react to and seek to act on the dilemmas of poverty and inequality in their own country. The young Bangladeshis are likely to go on to support, fund, and work in government or non-governmental development organizations; similarly, the U.S. students are likely to enter nonprofit, teaching, or social service careers at home or abroad. As these young people think together about the issues facing a developing country, they develop truly internationalist perspectives, so crucial at a time when global concerns must inform the reduction of poverty, the creation of justice, and the enactment of sustainable development.

Staffing and organizational connections:

Resident director, Dr. Haroun Er Rashid, a Bangladeshi with U.S. graduate degrees in geography and development economics, is Director of the School of Environmental Science and Management at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB). A Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and author of the definitive geographical text on Bangladesh, Rashid is the founder of a private development organization whose objective is to enable smallholder and landless families to generate more income from environmentally sound projects and programs. IUB and HECUA are now collaborating on a semester-length program, to be piloted in spring 2006.

Results after four years of the program (approximately 80 U.S. participants)

Community and Development in Bangladesh is thoroughly and continuously evaluated. At the end of the four weeks, students complete extensive evaluations of logistical, cultural, and programmatic areas. Each year the resident director of the program and a visiting faculty co-director from the U.S. complete evaluative reports, and a committee of faculty from HECUA's member institutions conducts a thorough review, resulting in revisions in and a decision whether to continue the program. The faculty committee acts in tandem with HECUA's Director of Programs to effect recommended changes.

Each of these evaluation instruments indicates that in the first four years, the program is consistently meeting its objectives for students to:

1. Integrate critical thinking and research skills with experiential learning
2. Develop critical understanding of the complex interplay of social, political, and economic factors in poverty and decision-making in urban and rural Bangladesh, and of the ideologies, policies, and practices of international and domestic development agents
3. Hear firsthand the aspirations and world views of poor rural and urban Bangladeshis
4. Prepare for ethical action as relatively wealthy and powerful global citizens

Students, faculty reviewers, and faculty and administrators at consortium institutions have had high praise for the resident director, for the work with the IUB students, and above all, for the transformative nature of this study away experience. Students have been particularly eloquent about how the course has changed them, saying:

•“I learned so much, not only about Bangladesh, but about myself. This has definitely been a life-changing experience, and I really think classes like these bring the world together and help prevent misunderstanding.”

•“The course raises more questions than it supplies answers, but such inquiries expand minds, open ears, and change lives forever.”

•“This Bangladesh program has exposed me fully to the idea of the world as a classroom. The field research taught me more in a few weeks than an entire semester of schooling in theories of development. I plan to use this experience as a foundation for my constructivist learning.”