The Tanzania Summer Program

Dr. Stoltzfus directs a summer program for Cornell and Tanzanian students that enhances cross-cultural competence and provides an opportunity for students to learn about global health issues in the Tanzanian context. The program is a collaboration between Cornell University and Kilimanjaro Christian Medical College (KCMC) in Moshi, Tanzania.

What motivated you to incorporate service-learning into your teaching?

“The frustration with the boundaries of the classroom and just how difficult it was to convey a lot of the knowledge that I had constructed. But even more so the desire to let students learn directly from the world. There’s a human element, because we’re trying to work with health disparities and equities and issues of social justice. We can talk about those in a heady way in the classroom. We can even draw people much more substantially into those through excellent readings and discussions and videos and that sort of thing. Still, there are some kinds of understanding that only happen when you are making a face to face human connection with the people who are living with these inequities. The ethical dimensions of that—just the human dimensions of that—in terms of compassion and empathy and what that means for our life choices and the ideas that we convey...all of that kind of understanding and knowledge can happen. I mean, it’s happened for myself and I see it happening for my students much more powerfully and rapidly and deeply if they’re making those human connections face to face than me telling them about it or even seeing it in a video.”

What do you think is the added value of service-learning?

“My role as a teacher becomes much more facilitative. It’s like giving them the opportunity, giving them permission, giving them courage and encouragement. But the learning becomes much more in the hands of the student. The student is constructing knowledge. Students come away from Tanzania learning things that I don’t know because they’re experienced things that I haven’t experienced and they have experienced things through their world views and their lenses that are unique to them. So that’s totally different and really fantastic to watch.

Another thing I see in the students that come back is a real sense of confidence. I think they gain knowledge of a type that they have not gained in the classroom, and that gives them a confidence as a Cornell student and as a human being. I see that in the students that come back, from not only the Tanzania program but from other global health programs. There’s a sense of mastery of a sort, of self-confidence that expresses itself when they’re in the classroom. I teach a course called nutrition problems in developing nations and it’s targeted to juniors and seniors. I taught it for several years before the global health program started and then I taught it after the global health program started, and now a lot of those students have been on global health field experiences. The difference in the classroom is really palpable. What happens in discussions, the kind of questions that are being asked, just the level that students are engaging with the knowledge. Part of that is that they know more about the problems but also I think they just feel like they’ve got ideas and stories to bring into the classroom that changes the classroom for everybody. It makes it much more fun for me to teach in the classroom, so that’s one of the benefits that I find as well.”