

Service Learning

Moves Nursing to the Frontiers of Community

BY CHARLOTTE KENNY SCHOBBER, WITH LAURA M. KARGES

Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates classroom instruction with meaningful community service and reflection. Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, values discipleship and believes life is best experienced by serving God and applying a biblical worldview and sharing God's love with others. This includes a commitment to integrating service into the curriculum of the college. One of the Nursing Program's expected outcomes is that students will: "use Christian values as a foundation to provide caring service in reaching out to our local and global community as an example of servant leadership modeled by Jesus Christ."¹

The Union College Nursing Program instructors believe that service learning will: (1) enrich students' learning experience at college while motivating them to better appreciate their civic responsibilities and Christian discipleship experience; (2) help students model the professional values of their calling; and (3) strengthen the communities with which the students interact through service.

In keeping with these beliefs, the Nursing Program instructors have incorporated a service-learning course into the curriculum. Titled "Frontier Nursing," the course "introduces the nursing student to principles and practices of health care on the frontiers of developing and third world countries, and [provides] opportunities for professional practice in these areas throughout the world."² In implementing the course, the teacher and students collaborate to ensure that "[c]oncepts of

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basic health education, use of natural remedies, and prevention of diseases throughout the life cycle are emphasized."³

The course, usually taken in the junior year of the B.S.N. degree program, encourages students to enroll in an elective two-week field experience that provides them with the opportunity, as part of a multidisciplinary health care team, to perform village health-assessments, provide basic public-health education, and assist in providing medical care to patients in a developing country.⁴

In preparation for their 10-day to two-week field trip, the students send out fundraising letters to finance their travel. The organizers use funds from donors and from the departmental budget to buy supplies and medicines in bulk.

The Frontier Nursing field trip focuses on the Miskito Indians, who reside in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region of Nicaragua. The nursing team

works out of the Tasba Raya Adventist Clinic in the town of Francia Sirpi.

The Trip

Our trip began on a beautiful summer day as 16 students and six mentors (two faculty members, two alumni, and two nurses from the community) caught a flight from Omaha, Nebraska, to Managua, Nicaragua. From there, it was a short hop on a small plane to Waspmam, on the northeastern side of the country. Then the frontier loomed ahead of us. A three-hour bumpy, dusty drive on a 40-year-old army truck nicknamed



One of the nurse volunteers for the Frontier Nursing class and a Union College nursing student pray with a family at one of the Nicaragua clinics.

“The Duce” took us to our headquarters for the next 14 days.

Our home base is the porch that wraps around a multipurpose room on the grounds of the Tasba Raya Adventist Mission. Nature, in its raw beauty, surrounds us as we perch above the surrounding jungle. Walkways and dirt paths form spokes that lead from the porch to crude showers and our sleeping quarters, a room with 10 bunks, each shrouded in mosquito netting. Our resident guard dog, Jade, faithfully makes his rounds of the property.

The porch is our gathering place—here we eat, worship, share the day’s activities, take cover from downpours, hang clothes to dry, and fill small journals with our thoughts and reflections. Both mentors and students experience conflicting emotions—a sense of uncertainty, on the one hand, and anticipation and challenge, on the other. The non-traditional educational setting changes existing relationships and serves as a catalyst for redefined expectations. In this program, all are teachers and all are learners.

We collaborate to provide health care to hundreds of Miskito Indian natives in six jungle villages. Doing so provides practice in skills that students have learned in the previous semesters of nursing coursework and requires the supportive expertise of registered nurses committed to providing patient care and mentoring students in academic and personal growth.

The Daily Schedule

The Nicaraguan frontier ministry has a rhythm of its own. Each day, we rise early, and before the morning mist clears, eat a quick breakfast and have worship on the porch. We load the medical supplies, our lunch, and clean water onto “The Duce.” Most days we can drive to the clinic site at the local village schoolhouse, but not always. Some days we must trek to the villages following a one- to two-hour ride. One morning, as a student recorded in her journal, “we drove on a dirt road until it disappeared and then carried our supplies through the jungle as men went before us hacking a path for us to get through. It was scary and exciting at the same time. We can’t believe we made it.” Together, the students and teachers set up the clinic. Then the real work of caring begins.



A Frontier Nursing student takes a baby’s vital signs in the waiting room of a clinic.

The Miskito people are friendly, warm, and trusting; a joy to serve. No one is elderly by North American standards; many arrive as family groups. All walk to the clinic, many taking hours to arrive. Older children carry younger ones. The most common health problems are ear infections, gastric and lung infections, worms, scabies, uncared-for injuries, tuberculosis, malaria, skin problems, and pregnancy/birth concerns.

Throughout the week, students deliver many kinds of care: dispensing medications, leading out and consulting in teams that assess and treat patients, organizing incoming patients while recording basic health information, bathing babies and young children with a scabies-ridding medicated solution, and presenting projects they developed earlier in the Frontier Nursing class.

Our clinic patients are very appreciative. Working around the language barrier, both patients and nurses strive to find creative ways to share and understand. The nurses use innovative techniques as circumstances require, offering a prayer, a hug, and a smile to all. One student reflected: “Something about being here makes the date and time seem irrelevant. I love it . . . it is so new, so full of opportunity for good and new to happen.”

The children each receive a pill that will keep them worm-free for three months and add six months to their lives. As a reward for taking the chalky medication, they are given a multiple vitamin, which they consider a rare and tasty treat. The children also receive new clothes donated by the Union College community.

We are able to care for a wide variety of illnesses and medical problems, but occasionally patients arrive at the outposts whose injuries or illnesses are more serious and require a doctor’s care and/or admission to a hospital. They ride back with us to the clinic at Francia, where they must wait until a doctor arrives.



Laura Karges irrigates a child's ear at a village clinic.

In preparation for their 10-day to two-week field trip, the students send out fundraising letters to finance their travel.



"The Duce," loaded with Union College students, volunteer nurses, and supplies, is ready to travel to a jungle village.

The mission has a truck and access to a four-wheeler that is used to transport people to the hospital in Wasparam.

At the end of each day, we have cared for up to 150 people. With weary steps, we walk back to "The Duce" and bump along the dirt trails back to our camp.

Journaling About Their Day

The evening brings quiet moments when participants struggle to gain an understanding of themselves and of recent events, including times of difficulty and sorrow. Close, supportive relationships develop within the group as we see the fragility of life and realize how little we can do. But there is also the exhilaration of recognizing that our treatment may have meant the difference between life and death.

The day we reached the camp, one student wrote in her journal: "I keep thinking, What if they were living my life and I was living theirs? For the next [few] days I will try to step in the shoes of the Miskito Indians." Living life in others' shoes is an experience that one cannot get by simply paying tuition.

Another reflected on the beauty of staring into the night sky: "I love the nights here. You couldn't ask for more, when you're sitting on the porch freshly showered, enjoying the breeze, sharing my thoughts with myself on paper. I keep staring at the stars and try to embed them in my mind, to take back with me . . . a starry night always in my heart."

And then the challenge: "It's great doing something so tangible, but there's so much more I wish we could do. It is daunting knowing all the health needs . . . it feels like we are putting a Band-Aid on a deep wound."

From this a personal lesson: "Being so close to these people, touching them both literally and figuratively, has made me see myself and my life so differently. I keep running out of words to describe how I feel about all that I am seeing. I just know that I wish I could do this forever."

Is this not the meaning of a job well done? So asks another student entry: "It was hard work, super hot, and I really did not want to do it. But I did it anyway. When we were all done . . . [we] were exhausted and walked back . . . to camp, and the little kids from the village yelled 'Jessica, Jessica!' That was the most awesome feeling in the world."

Reflecting on the Experience

The frontier nursing class has stimulated the Nursing Program faculty to rethink the nature of learning. We have concluded that it should not be restricted to textbooks and classrooms. The privileged must learn to embrace the less privileged, the academic must interact with the real world, learning should include service, and discipleship should cross all frontiers.

Research shows that service learning contributes to academic learning, personal growth, and professional development.⁵ The Nicaraguan Frontier Nursing class achieves all of these goals in the context of Jesus' command to minister to "the least of these my brethren" (KJV).

During the two weeks in Nicaragua, students and professionals work and live side by side. Although they share the same experiences, each has to integrate the events into his or her personal worldview and life perspective. In addition, with mentor and mentoree inspiring each other to achieve, believe, and make wise choices, the group as a whole come to view education as wholistic development that enables students to promote integrated growth in others—a goal vital to Adventist education.

To ensure that students achieve this level of integrated learning—which combines personal and communal, theory and experience, need and fulfillment—the Frontier Nursing course employs guided reflection through journaling. Initially, the Nicaraguan journal was merely a tool for students to use in track-



Life on the porch at Tasba Raya Adventist Mission, home base after a long, tiring day.



Each day, a faithful fan club of children watches for “The Duce” to pass by their home.

ing daily learning activities, but it has evolved to be much more. Students are asked to record the events that occur, and then reflect on questions that will help them broaden their perspectives about the trip:

- How did you feel about your experience?
- What did you learn that you did not know or understand before?
- Has your experience changed the way you think/feel about your nursing career?
- What will you do differently because of this experience?

The Pew Health Professions Commission⁶ in 1998 noted the following benefits of service-learning activities: (1) a sense of personal satisfaction, (2) professional growth, (3) a higher level of critical-thinking skills, (4) preparation for nursing practice in a dynamic and diverse health-care delivery system, and (5) an increased awareness of unmet needs in clients, families, communities, and populations. Evidence of achieving all of these outcomes appears in the journals students submitted following their service-learning experiences in the jungles of Nicaragua.

Long-Term Impact

For many students, the Frontier Nursing field trip has helped to inspire a long-term commitment to service, particularly as international volunteers. On 15 occasions, Union College nursing alumni have volunteered as mentors to students on the Nicaragua trip. Many of these R.N.’s participated as students in the Frontier Nursing field trip.

Among the values espoused by Union College administrators and faculty is the importance of discipleship—that life is best experienced by serving God, applying a biblical worldview, and sharing God’s love with others. A closing entry in one of the Frontier Nursing students’ journals shows how the trip helped to develop her commitment to discipleship: “it hits me how unbelievably tiny, how insignificant we are . . . even being here in Nicaragua and trying to share our wealth of knowledge . . . is nothing in this huge universe. Nothing means anything unless God is in it, and that’s what makes me smile about today. God

is behind what we are doing here and what we’ll leave behind.”

The Frontier Nursing trip to Nicaragua is more than an adventure, more than merely spending a few days doing good in an area that needs so much help. It fosters effective learning, personal growth, wholistic development, and community responsibility. It also challenges the participants to discover the deeper meaning of discipleship—that we are here “not to be ministered unto but to minister.” Through reflection, students are able to intellectually and affectively explore their experience.⁷ This helps them integrate what they learned in class and through clinical experience to achieve insight and personal meaning. ✍



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