

# Summary and Assessment Package for CARE 2011

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## 1. Executive Summary

From March 8<sup>th</sup> through March 11<sup>th</sup> of 2011, I accompanied a group of seven Western Carolina University students to Washington, D.C., to participate in the annual conference of the international humanitarian organization CARE, the “Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere.” (Three other students had signed up and been registered for the trip, but had to withdraw for various reasons in the week directly preceding the conference.) Also joining the group as a mentor for the students was WCU staff member Bethany Ketting (BA ’10), a WCU philosophy graduate who had participated in the conference in 2010. The activity was generously funded by grants from the Department of Philosophy and Religion, the Center for Service Learning, the Honors College, and Undergraduate Studies (QEP activities fund), at a total cost of \$3866.08. This included all registration fees, transportation, and lodging fees for all participants (including \$315 reimbursed to one of the students, who graciously volunteered to drive his van to Washington, D.C. to reduce our costs). Students paid for their own meals on the way to and from the conference. All of the units that supported this project have our deepest thanks.

The goal of this experience was to engage the students more personally in the learning they were doing in my SLC (Service-Learning Component)-designated course in the Department of Philosophy and Religion, “Religion, Suffering, and the Moral Imagination” (PAR 354). Specifically, I hoped that participating in the conference would help foster students’ intellectual and moral growth; integrate their academic work with “real life”; and develop effective and responsible communication skills; while practicing a form of civic engagement that would also help them clarify and act on their own values. Although there are clearly areas that could be improved if this opportunity is offered again in the future, in terms of all of the primary goals, I would rate the experience as a success based on my own evaluation of student work and the personal growth I saw in them, as well as independent student assessment of the experience.

In terms of their coursework, [REDACTED]

Beyond the coursework, however, I would say this. It is a great thing to read a paper or hear a discussion in class based on the interplay of texts students have read and their service experiences, but to me, seeing the empowerment of students who were actively engaging with their elected officials on issues that they were both knowledgeable and passionate about, was more than that: it was genuinely inspiring. I would very much like to be able to include this experience again in future iterations of the course, as I think the students benefited tremendously from it on a personal level.

## 2. Background Information on CARE, SLC-designated courses and PAR 354

CARE is a non-sectarian, BBB-accredited charity, has received a rating of “A+” from the American Institute of Philanthropy, and is a 20-year honoree of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, with 91% of donated resources going to program funding and only 9% used for administration and fundraising. While best known for creating the original CARE packages (“Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe”) sent to Europe after World War II to find and prevent survivors from starving, the organization now focuses much of its humanitarian work on easing the suffering of women and children in the entire developing world:

CARE tackles underlying causes of poverty so that people can become self-sufficient. Recognizing that women and children suffer disproportionately from poverty, CARE places special emphasis on working with women to create permanent social change. Women are at the heart of CARE's community-based efforts to improve basic education, prevent the spread of HIV, increase access to clean water and sanitation, expand economic opportunity and protect natural resources. CARE also delivers emergency aid to survivors of war and natural disasters, and helps people rebuild their lives.  
(<http://www.care.org/careswork/whatwedo/index.asp>)

Working with CARE was therefore particularly appropriate for a course that focuses on religious, philosophical (ethical and metaphysical), and literary responses to suffering around the world, as PAR 354 does. I redesigned this course two years ago by adding a significant service-learning component, believing that this would be an effective way to facilitate student engagement in this particular class; it is currently the only fully SLC-designated course in the College of Arts and Sciences. In this way, students are able to bring their own experience into contact with the texts they are reading about theoretical (how to make sense of it) and practical (what to do about it) responses to suffering; and bring the texts to bear on concrete situations.

The general goal here, as with all service learning, is that the texts are brought to bear on the students' experiences; and the experiences help to further illuminate the texts.

Students in SLC courses at Western Carolina must complete at least fifteen hours of service work for organizations approved by their faculty, and at least 20% of the course grade must be dependent on assignments drawing on their service experiences (*not* the service itself). Students received a total of five hours of service credit for participating in the conference, although in practice the number of hours they committed to the experience was much greater than that. They therefore still had to fulfill an additional ten hours at approved service sites in the local community.

### 3. The CARE Conference

CARE's conference is a unique event held each year in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the work the organization has done and is doing, inform individual activists about what they can do to help with both current humanitarian crises and continuing issues, and actively lobby legislators on Capitol Hill to commit to two or three very specific proposals for humanitarian assistance. This year, the conference was held in conjunction with a celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International Women's Day, which gave the event a particularly festive feel throughout.

The conference is a two and a half day event. The first evening there is a kick-off concert to generate excitement. This year, it was headlined by performer-activists India.Arie, Michael Franti, Crystal Bowersox, Sarah Darling, and Idan Raichel. (A number of our students met one or more of these performers during or after the concert.)

The first full day of the conference is both informational and motivational. 1,100 conference participants heard from several plenary speakers: Helene Gayle (CARE President and CEO), Melinda Gates (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), Mrs. Laura W. Bush (former First Lady of the United States), Rajiv Shah (Administrator of USAID), and Melanne Verveer (United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues). They also learned about current and ongoing humanitarian issues, as well as the past, present, and future work of CARE in addressing these issues in various break-out training sessions. Finally, they spent some time learning how to effectively lobby their own members of Congress.

On the final day of the conference, participants put their knowledge, training, and passion to work: they are placed in groups with others from their own state and legislative district, and they actually meet face-to-face with their Senators and Representatives (or their staffers) in the legislative office buildings on Capitol Hill, where they make the best case they can for a couple of legislative "asks" for humanitarian assistance. This year, participants were encouraging their legislators not to make draconian cuts to the miniscule part (roughly 1%) of the US budget that goes to foreign aid, even in these difficult economic times; to support streamlining legislation that targets micro-financing programs on the poorest of the poor in the developing world; and to support the Education for All act when it is reintroduced. A summary of the 2011 CARE Conference events, including pictures, legislative training sessions, and speakers may be found at the following web address: <http://www.careconference.org/summary.asp>.

#### 4. Preparatory and Post-conference Assignments and Impact

In order to most effectively utilize the experience as part of the course, I tailored the student response papers for the conference participants to capitalize on what they would be doing at the conference itself (that is, their prompts were somewhat different than those of the other students). Prior to the conference, I asked them to look at the issues sessions they could attend, do some initial research, and decide on a couple of sessions that they were particularly interested in attending. After returning from the conference, they reflected in another response paper on what they had learned from their experience there. Finally, they each wrote a follow-up advocacy letter to a member of congress they had lobbied on Capitol Hill. It was up to the students whether to alter the letters and send them in to their legislators after I graded them. (These three assignments are included in Appendix 2, along with a few samples of student responses to each.)

After our return, a number of student participants decided (on their own initiative) that they wanted to collect money for a “21<sup>st</sup> century CARE package,” an initiative launched by CARE in honor of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International Women’s Day. Participating students solicited donations from classmates and others, and ultimately chose to target their contributions toward the purchase of mosquito nets, textbooks and school uniforms. More about these new CARE packages can be found here: <http://www.carepackage.org/>.

#### 5. Assessment and Suggestions for Future

In order to assess the effectiveness of the experience, I held a debriefing oral session with participants where we discussed our impressions, and I designed a written form with a number of questions, both quantitative and narrative, for participants to respond to. I asked that they submit these to Amy McKenzie in the Department of Philosophy and Religion, so they would be blind on my end. Six of the seven participants elected to respond; McKenzie compiled the results into a single document (Appendix 1). Students who responded were uniformly positive, although they varied on how effective certain aspects of the experience were for them in their oral and written feedback. All either agreed or strongly agreed that the experience positively contributed to their overall class and university experience, as well as their intellectual development and their thinking about their future life and career goals. Perhaps most importantly, 5 strongly agreed (and 1 agreed) in the summary assessment that they would be interested in participating in the conference again.

Narrative responses to their overall experience ranged from “life changing” through “incredibly positive,” “really positive,” “great experience,” and “positive”; only one participant was “neutral” about it, because the conference “did not live up to my expectations.” Participants were uniformly positive about the plenary speakers, although several were a bit overwhelmed by the amount of information they received in the first full day of the conference (“one of the most intense learning experiences I’ve ever undergone”).

Clearly the highlight of the entire experience was the legislative lobbying day, however, with responses including the following: “While I was very nervous on this day I do feel it was a great experience, and showed me how influential my voice can be”; “The sense of significance of our work, combined with the experience of walking into congressional offices was almost

overwhelming.” One student said this: “These were incredibly informative, and empowering – it was an honor to be able to do that. I never thought I would have the means, or the time, to travel to DC to actually meet the people who are there to represent my family and me. It meant so much to be able to go.”

In terms of QEP goals, students were most positive about the experience helping them clarify and act on their own purpose and values, and to practice civic engagement. They also found the response papers they did prior to and after the conference to be helpful, although they indicated some ways that those could be improved to help strengthen the experience further. Interestingly, the most disagreement was regarding how useful it was to have a former participant as a mentor for the conference, with two strongly agreeing that it was beneficial, two more agreeing, one neutral, and one disagreeing. This is clearly an area that would need to be explored further, although I will say that it was indeed helpful for *me* to have a previous participant as a mentor, as it freed me up to speak with conference organizers and develop other contacts, such as the connection I made with organizers of the Global Poverty Project, whom I hope we can bring to campus in the next academic year.

Suggestions for the future that arose in oral and written conversation with the participating students, if funding for this opportunity were to be available again, include the following, in decreasing order of importance (from my own perspective):

- 1) Stay in Washington, D.C. the night the conference ends for a morning of sightseeing or at the Holocaust Museum, then drive back to WCU that afternoon/evening. As the conference closing reception did not conclude until after 5 pm and we had to stop for dinner after getting out of D.C. traffic close to 9 pm, it was around 4 am before we arrived back in Cullowhee this year. As one student astutely pointed out, this was not particularly safe, as everyone was utterly exhausted at that point. Students suggested that the added cost here might be offset by staying at a different, less expensive hotel (the hotel cost absorbed a huge proportion of our budget), and taxiing to the conference hotel.
- 2) Conduct a *mandatory* session on what to expect at the conference. Although the conference mentor conducted one of these, some participants still clearly felt that they could have been better prepared for how hard they would be working over the course of the conference.
- 3) Focus on the legislative “asks” in the pre-conference response papers: students indicated they would have been better prepared before the conference had we focused on those rather than the other (supplemental) issues sessions.
- 4) Do a basic civics review (general and specific to each student’s legislative district) before the conference. Some participants admitted to being a bit overwhelmed by their own lack of knowledge of the US Senate and House of Representatives and their own representation therein.
- 5) Debrief at least once *during* the conference. Although the conference itself is packed, students indicated a desire to get together, at least once on the evening of the first day of the conference, to discuss what they were learning and doing.

6) It might be useful to require students to contribute a nominal amount towards their registration fee. This is more tentative, but I am inclined to think that this might act as an incentive for them to begin thinking very early about why they are going. As noted above, registration for the conference (including four catered meals!) was only \$45 per student; most of the costs incurred were in the hotel stay and transportation.

7) Finally, something that we can only affect indirectly as participants: several students noted that they felt the conference needed more sessions geared to first-time participants. I will forward this suggestion to my contacts at CARE, but for our own purposes, we can only really do something about this by enacting suggestions 2-4, above.