

INCORPORATING A SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT INTO AN INTERNATIONAL MBA TRIP

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ABSTRACT

International MBA trips and experiences are a very common curriculum component in many MBA programs. However, incorporating service learning experiences and projects are not typical for many international MBA trips. This paper will present how an international trip was organized to incorporate a service learning component and the extraordinary learning that resulted from the experience. "To do good you actually have to do something" the CEO of Patagonia proclaimed in a television advertisement in June, 2010. The MBA students on the trip described in this paper certainly did good because they actually did something.

The international trip is the required, culminating class in the MBA program at the institution. The MBA program offers a variety of several international destinations that change yearly. Each trip is ten days in length and is led by two MBA faculty members that develop trips based on personal preferences for travel, professional contacts or a combination. The trip is included in the cost of tuition that many students pay for themselves, as tuition based employer reimbursement has decreased over time. The international trip component of the MBA program is designed to expose students to business activities internationally through business visits. Cultural exposure is a secondary factor. Many MBA students regard the trip as their reward for obtaining the degree. The idea for the MBA trip was first discussed in May, 2009. Cambodia was the first choice of the two faculty members for the destination. The reasons included the exotic location; the long history of the country; the more recent history of the Khmer Rouge and the atrocities of the Pol Pot regime, which resulted in the infamous killing fields outside Phnom Penh. This unique history coupled with the expansion of economic opportunities present in Cambodia helped to formulate the trip concept. Singapore was then

chosen because of its proximity and the fact that Singapore is a business powerhouse. It was hoped that the economic contrast would provide for a stimulating learning environment for the students. After much research and discussion a service learning component to the trip was included because of the interests of the faculty member and the vast need and opportunities in Cambodia. The current economy of Cambodia has relied heavily on foreign assistance with about half of the government budget depending on foreign aid. Cambodia had an estimated 2008 GDP per capita of \$ 2000 US. Coupled with the devastating poverty is the fact the more than half the population is under 21 years old. The international trips undertaken in the MBA program had never included a destination as economically challenged as Cambodia. The service learning component was especially important given that trip was to conclude in Singapore with business visits showcasing opportunities flourishing in an economic power house.

The most viable opportunity for a valuable service learning experience was determined to be Peaceful Children Home located outside the city limits. The orphanage was chosen because the associate director of the orphanage was very amenable to receiving a group of thirty four due to the personal contact of the already established relationship of the college friend of one of our MBA staff member. The Orphanage is so remote that our native born Phnom Penh tour guide had never heard of it. The Orphanage has operated with private funds since opening in 1980 to care for three young boys. The associate director was one of those first three young men. He has recently returned to the facility after obtaining an education in Thailand and working for the US government. There were sixty five girls and boys, ranging from age 5 to 18 living in the facility when we visited.