



Teaching Caselettes

LA CARPIO, COSTA RICA

Compromise

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A student working in La Carpio, a Costa Rican slum, faces pressure from a local church congregation doing charity work in the same area. The student must decide how to respond to the disruption that members of the congregation are causing to her own work at the local community center, without jeopardizing the charitable congregation's presence in the area and the long-term benefits it brings to the residents of La Carpio.

This case showcases a potent dilemma for civic engagement volunteers: students' positions as short-term (eight-week) volunteers can conflict with long-term plans for development in the local communities. While students can be eager to "make a difference," compromises often have to be made between the students' ideal plans and on-the-ground realities. The case also points to the critical importance of adequate preparation in any civic engagement work, not only in terms of understanding the local community and community partner, but also realizing that there may be other non-profit organizations in the same region.

Please refer to the "Ethics of Engagement" overview at the end of this document to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework this case was created to illustrate.

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Bonnie is spending her summer civic engagement internship in La Carpio, Costa Rica. La Carpio is a large slum outside of San Jose, and it is comprised primarily of illegal Nicaraguan immigrants. Most of these immigrants do not have the proper identification papers that allow them to be legally employed. Often, they work in construction and housekeeping, receiving approximately a third of what equally qualified, legal Costa Ricans are paid. Bonnie's local community partner is the Costa Rican Foundation (pseudonym, CRF). The CRF runs community centers in La Carpio that serve as supplementary education and day care centers for children who would otherwise be left alone when their parents go to work. The CRF runs community centers in La Carpio that serve as supplementary education and day care centers for children who would otherwise be left alone when their parents go to work. The CRF also runs support groups for women, offers microfinance opportunities, and has a clinic to address basic medical needs.

One primary area of Bonnie's work in La Carpio is to improve the education programs being offered for children in the community centers. Women in the local community run these programs, and CRF offers ideas and funding. Bonnie decides to create a new program on interpersonal relationships, a social skills class that teaches children how to treat others in a respectful way. This new class is part of a broader goal to bring more order to the classroom and establish a routine to which the children can adhere.

One morning, shortly after the full implementation of the social skills program, the children are sitting in a circle singing songs when around 15 high school students walking on the road by the building begin calling for the children. The children rush out of the class to see the students and to receive balloon swords that the high-schoolers are distributing. Bonnie is annoyed with the situation for several reasons. Not only have these students disrupted what little semblance of classroom order Bonnie has painstakingly tried to achieve, but the gifts that the group is distributing are incongruent with the message of non-violence that Bonnie's program carries.

Bonnie finds out that the older students are part of an evangelical church congregation that meets nearby. They want the young children to follow them to their church. Bonnie is against this idea. She approaches the evangelical minister who is leading the group and starts a conversation, which quickly escalates into a heated argument. The minister notes that Bonnie has only spent six months working in Costa Rica while he, in contrast, has been working with the local church for the past four years. Bonnie asks the group to avoid the road when classes are in session; the minister counters by asking Bonnie if she would rather the evangelical group never come down the road again. Bonnie is intimidated and uncertain as to whether she has the authority to make any decision. The confrontation ends on an unresolved note. In the following days, after talking to the local women working at the community center, Bonnie starts to understand that this evangelical church has done many good things for the La Carpio community.

Overview of Ethics of Engagement Case Studies

These case studies were developed as part of a workshop series the Kenan Institute for Ethics provided for students preparing for intensive civic engagement experiences. The goals for the summer experience were three-fold: to gain self-knowledge, to deepen students' commitment to life-long civic engagement, and to help the communities in which they lived and worked for the summer. Student projects took place in local and global locations, ranging from working with African immigrants in Ireland, to documenting social change movements in South Africa, to managing environmental organizations in Portland, Oregon.

The cases are based on actual student experiences in the field. They set forward the ethical dilemmas the students faced on personal, organizational, and systemic levels. They also present scenarios in which there is no clear right answer. Rather, the students in each case study are challenged by seemingly intractable problems for which there seem to be only wrong and perhaps less wrong solutions.

In constructing the teaching notes, we referred to the "Right-Right Dilemmas" paradigm drawn from Rush Kidder's book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. We modified this concept, suggesting that the students will likely face "Wrong-Wrong Dilemmas" in their summer placements, in which both the community and individual goods are compromised; neither loyalty nor truth can be fully achieved; long-term and short-term prospects are equally pessimistic; and neither justice nor mercy can be experienced by all those affected by the dilemma.

In the workshop, we also introduced the students to three "Resolution Principles," which we offered as frameworks to enable clear thinking about ethical dilemmas. These principles are the classical ethical principles of

Utilitarianism - providing the greatest good for the greatest number

Deontology / Principle-Based (Kantianism) - following the highest principle as absolutely as possible

Care-Based - emphasizing the importance of relationships and paying attention to the particular context and individuals involved

After reading the cases, students in the workshop were divided into small groups to discuss the questions listed in the teaching notes and then returned to the large group for a facilitator-led discussion. Given the significance and difficulty of the tensions faced by the characters in the cases, a good session often ended with significant debate, rather than consensus about a right course of action.

Our aim with these cases is to provide students preparing for civic engagement experiences with tools they will find helpful as they face morally serious dilemmas in real-world contexts radically different than those in a university setting.