PSY 233: Psychology of Civic Engagement
Trinidad and Tobago: Spring 2010

PSY 233: Psychology of Civic Engagement travel course to the islands of Trinidad and Tobago gave nine students an overview of the many issues involved in the field of psychology discussing civic engagement and service learning. Students were required to critique, analyze, and integrate civic engagement issues raised in the readings, class discussions, and the real world to gain an understanding of contemporary concerns from a psychological perspective. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. This includes efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem, or interact with the institutions of representative democracy.

The time spent in Trinidad and Tobago reinforced what students learned in the classroom and immersed them in a different culture; where pro-social behavior is not often exhibited. Students became familiar with various community/pro-social agencies within Trinidad and Tobago and the United States. The goal of the trip was to allow students to apply what they have learned about civic engagement psychology to real life applications and to give them an opportunity to observe and interact with people from a different cultural viewpoint. Students took part in many traditional Trinidadian activities. Three service-learning activities were planned throughout the course of this travel experience.

One of the planned service activities for the trip involved the students speaking to current high school students here in America and in Trinidad. Students were split into two groups to create an interactive presentation on the importance of staying in school, going to college, and following one’s dreams. Also, prior to leaving for Trinidad, students were required to research the culture they were going to be immersed in during their trip by comparing and contrasting Trinidadian culture to American culture.

After several class meetings and much preparation, the day finally came to board the plane and fly to the beautiful island of Trinidad. The class was greeted by the refreshing change of warm breezes and sunny skies. The students were given an itinerary with a day-by-day break down of all the activities the class was going to be
completing. With much help from Pace University alum, Erin Brereton (Dyson College of Arts and Sciences, class of 2008), our travel course received guidance on traveling to Trinidad and Tobago.

After checking in and exploring the hotel, the class was given a tour of the Emperor Valley Zoo. This is the only zoo in the Caribbean, and it featured many of the exotic animals and plants featured on the island. Students were able to pet an Ocelot, which is a wild cat, and viewed chimpanzees displaying their ingenuity by taking the tour guide’s water bottle, opening it, drinking it, and then requesting more by handing it back to the tour guide!

The following day we worked with Habitat for Humanity Trinidad. Here, the students took part in painting a Trinidadian home. The students braved the intense heat from the sun to paint both the inside and outside of the house. Although much work was involved, the students thoroughly enjoyed partaking in this event. At the end of the day, the house that they were looking at was a transformation from how it appeared when they first arrived.

After getting some rest from their day of painting, the class travelled to St. Dominic’s Children’s Home. When the students first arrived, they were split into pairs to go off to separate houses to play with the younger children. After that, the students were asked to stay for a lunch prepared by the staff of St. Dominic’s. The students feasted on delicious chicken, vegetables, and rice and beans. Once their stomachs were full, it was time to give the presentations that they had been working so hard on while back in America. The audience consisted of the older children of St. Dominic’s, who responded well to the discussion of the importance of staying in school, going to college, and following their dreams. Many of the children stayed after the presentations to further talk with the Pace students about college and their futures.

The next day was the free day that the class was able to experience in Tobago. The students were able to explore the beautiful area called Pigeon Point Beach. The white-sand beach was accompanied by small local shops, small restaurants, and plenty of activities to do. After enjoying the relaxing day in the sun, it was off to the Asa Wright Nature Center. Here, the students were given a brief orientation that consisted of the history and purpose of the nature center. Then the class was taken to observe the process of how the coffee on the premises was made.
The students even had the opportunity to partake in the process, which included grinding the coffee beans.

The Asa Wright employees then brought the class down the nature trail to begin some maintenance. The students began to clean some of the areas of the leaves and dirt that had accumulated, while others painted benches along the path. While performing this service, the students were given a tour of the grounds as they traveled from bench to bench. The hike was both educational and interesting.

After the first day was complete, the students would return the following day to continue the maintenance needed around the nature center. The class, along with Professor Walther, also gave a presentation to some of the employees of the Asa Wright Nature Center about why they came to Trinidad and Tobago, a little about Pace University, and the types of service that Pace performs. As a special treat to the students, the employees took the students to a nearby water pool that had a waterfall. The students relaxed by the water for a while after a hard day’s work, then boarded the bus to head back to the hotel.

Unfortunately, the last day in Trinidad and Tobago arrived. The students did not want to leave the beautiful scenery and weather of the island, but it was comforting to know that they were returning home to their families. Everyone boarded the bus and began the trek back to the airport to return to the States.

Once back in the U.S., students were required to complete a travel journal that documented their experience while visiting Trinidad and Tobago. Along with that, students planned the 5th annual Hunger Banquet, which helps promote the education of the effects of poverty and hunger on the world. This event gave all students within this course a chance to plan their own civic engagement event for the Pace University community, while raising over $800 for the US Fund for UNICEF.

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