Alison O'Connor
Graduation Year: Senior
College: Engineering
Major(s): Electrical Engineering
Minors(s): n/a
Scholar Group Membership: no

Did you received other funding for this project?: no
Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? Yes
More details on CUSE funding assistance?

Project Title: WorldTeach
Project Location: Namibia
ND Faculty Mentor: Melissa Marley-Bonnichson
Project Type: Service-Learning

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Career discernment and/or preparation, Internationalize your Notre Dame experience

Did your funded experience help you:
[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: A Little
[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: Yes
[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]: Very Much
[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]: Very Much
[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:Yes

Tell us about your experience.
During my 10 weeks in Namibia, Africa I taught Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Physical Education classes to students in grade 5-10 at Omungholyo Combined School. Throughout this time, I focused on exploring how effective technology education is at rural, developing schools, as well as what can be done to improve the current technology programs.

At Omungholyo, there was a computer lab with 20 computers, a printer, projector and limited internet. From teaching these classes I was able to learn a lot about technology in the area, as well as the positives and drawbacks of the current program. On the positive side, there is enthusiasm for ICT and the school I was working with had the resources to conduct classes, which is impressive given the very rural location of the school. However, there are countless drawbacks. For example, the quality of the computers and internet can make it difficult to provide an ICT education to all students. Because some of the computers are old or misused, some of my classes had about 15 working computers for 45 learners. To make things more challenging, in the area I was in, there is only one ICT technician for a fairly large area. This made in nearly impossible to schedule the technician to come and fix the technology.

The 10-week experience ended with an ICT conference in which myself and three other volunteer teachers were able to share our experiences teaching ICT with each other and ICT professionals throughout the country. This was a very valuable experience because I was able to see how different schools are overcoming the difficulties that come with teaching ICT. While educators throughout the country seem to all agree that technology education is vital to the future development of the country, many schools seem to lack the funds, the resources and qualified teachers to keep the programs running strong. In addition, large class sizes, limited computers and limited class time, makes it difficult to effectively teach ICT in the rural developing schools that the other volunteers and myself were teaching at. Throughout this conference, it was very interesting to compare the solutions some of the other volunteers and I had come up with the ones the other professionals are considering.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.
This project definitely left a strong impact on both the people I worked with and myself. First of all, in terms of the service aspect of my project (teaching at a school), my project helped both students and teachers at Omungholyo Combined School become more proficient on the computer. However, not only was I able to teach them about computers, I was able to discuss with my Principal and other administrators throughout the region about challenges or issues I see with the current program and discuss possible solutions to the current technology classes based on my research that they can try to implement in the future. Hopefully, by sharing my findings with them, they will begin to make improvements in the years to come. As a student-scholar, this project challenged me on many levels. Most notably, it forced me to think outside of the box and innovate solutions given the limited resources available in the area.

Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.
This experience definitely helped me discern where my life may head in the future. More specifically, it helped me see how I can connect my electrical engineering degree and my interest in post-graduate service. Before doing this academic-service, I never saw how these areas could really connect practically. However, through the work I did, I was able to clearly see how I can incorporate my electrical engineering background into many aspects of society. For example, even when teaching simple computers to children in rural Africa, I was able to engineer solutions to challenges I was facing in the classroom, such as faulty internet, and research solutions to make the ICT program more effective.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?
I would encourage all students to pursue academic-service related research projects. Through my volunteer teaching experience I was able to fully immerse myself in the Namibian culture and see the ICT program first hand as an actual teacher. My position as a teacher gave me valuable insight on technology programs throughout the country, and my colleagues at school were valuable resources throughout the whole experience. Also, by fully immersing myself in the Namibian culture, I was able to better understand why things are the way they are and help

me better develop and understand possible improvements to the current ICT programs for the future.