

Emily Okawara

Graduation Year: Junior

College: Arts & Letters

Major(s): American Studies

Minors(s): Education, Schooling, and Society

Scholar Group Membership: Sorin Scholars

Did you received other funding for this project?: no

Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? No

More details on CUSE funding assistance? Cuse funding was crucial in this opportunity, and I am so grateful!

Project Title: Nazareth Farm Senior Thesis Discernment Immersion

Project Location: Clarksburg, West Virginia

ND Faculty Mentor: Maria McKenna

Project Type: Service-Learning, Scholarly Immersion/Discernment

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Research/experience necessary for senior thesis or capstone project

Did your funded experience help you:

[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: Very Much

[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: Very Much

[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]:Very Much

Tell us about your experience.

I spend a week volunteering for Nazareth Farm, a non-profit organization located in rural West Virginia. All week I was immersed in service, both at the Farm and in the local community, with 37 college-aged volunteers from SUNY Oswego, Saint Anselm College, University of Dayton, and Merrimack College. I wanted to explore the kinds of service learning background that these volunteers were coming from and think more deeply about narrowing down my interest in the subject to a senior thesis question. I asked questions about and discussed all week their individual school's service learning programs, how each volunteer got involved, how they were enjoyed or challenged by this specific experience, and what they would take back to their programs. It was a really unique opportunity to sit down with people from four different schools and compare the kinds of service-learning opportunities their colleges had-- some through campus ministries, some through social concerns centers, some as an "alternative break" program, and others through an academic department.

I discovered patterns and more questions that I didn't expect to find, such as gender differences in service learning (interest, motivation, and actual participation) and the way that High School

programs had a substantial impact on the individual's desire and motivation to engage in service post-high school. Nazareth Farm is a religious organization, but still I was surprised how many volunteers used religion as the sole motivation to doing service-- and this, as well, was a gendered difference, with men more likely to state religion as a primary motivator and women more likely to state religion AND care for others, joy, civic/moral obligation, etc. For my senior thesis, I'd like to look more into these differences in motivation, taking a deeper look at the effects of gender, religion, and high school service programs.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.

Not only did this experience allow me to build upon and apply my learning from my courses in American Studies and Education, Schooling, and Society, but it challenged me to ask new questions and think in new ways. Interacting with different minds from all over the country, I explored my pre-existing perceptions on service, education, and poverty.

Tuesday through Friday, I led small groups of volunteers in volunteering at the Clarksburg Mission-- a homeless shelter, resource center, soup kitchen, and food pantry in Clarksburg West Virginia. Volunteers were introduced to the Appalachian culture, the Christian culture, and the stories of people residing in and dining at The Mission. After talking with residents about issues such as homelessness, addiction, poverty, incarceration and justice systems, I took the group down the road to do a reflection on our day, conversations had, and initial thoughts or processing that the volunteers might need. The ideas of kinship and ministry of presence were central, and we thought through conceptualizing and thinking about service as more than just physical labor-- much of it is being with and learning from people who are different from ourselves.

Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.

Through the interactions and explorations of this immersion experience, I have narrowed down the topic for my senior thesis and begun to think about preliminary research I may be able to do this summer. Beyond my senior thesis, the experience provided me time and space for career discernment, academic and spiritual reflection, and renewed curiosity toward issues and questions I'm passionate about.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?

Start early! I wish I had taken advantage of immersion/discernment resources earlier. I would also advise students planning to pursue similar projects to be open to new ideas or learning that doesn't come in the form you are expecting-- read up before your immersion, and then let the immersion take you in all sorts of directions of thought and experience you might not have imagined.

I acknowledge that this form has been filled out truthfully and to the best of my ability. I understand that this information will be shared with many different CUSE constituencies. As

such, I have provided as much useful information as I was able. I understand that CUSE will not complete my award disbursement until this form is successfully completed. If I have any questions or concerns, I will contact CUSE before submitting this form. To illustrate that you understand all of these points, please enter your Notre Dame email in the box below.
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