

## **Service-Learning with Tibetan Refugees in India: A Small University's Experience**

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### **Abstract**

In response to requests for assistance from a Tibetan refugee community in Mainpat, India, Northern Arizona University developed a unique service-learning experience, the Mainpat Project, to provide health and other services. The project continued for 4 years despite the limited infrastructure and resources of a small public university and the complexities of working with a host community in a remote area. The Mainpat Project brought together community leaders and multidisciplinary teams of students, faculty, and staff. Based on various types of assessments, observations, and direction from the community, activities focused on needs identified by the Tibetan refugees and interventions to enhance their quality of life. This reflective essay presents results of an exploratory study of community needs, community–university interactions, interventions built on new understandings, challenges, intended and unintended outcomes, and lessons learned from this experience. Proposed strategies for future work in Mainpat build upon existing models of global service-learning.

*Keywords:* Buddhism, global service-learning, India, multidisciplinary, remote, rural, Tibetan refugees

### **Introduction**

Go forward today with good intention, to do good to all sentient beings as your motivation. (*Tulku Tsori Rinpoche, personal communication, December 22, 2012*)

Global service-learning partnerships are complex endeavors for both the host community and the academic institution. Meaningful service-learning stems from community-directed priorities and partnerships based on trust and mutual respect, with the goal of equitable outcomes for all stakeholders (*Quaranto & Stanley, 2016; Williamson et al., 2016*). Americans, especially those in academia, come from an indisputable position of privilege and have too often entered a host community with idealism and an incomplete understanding of the community's needs and cultural context (*Mellom & Herrera, 2014; Tilley-Lubbs, 2009*). The

benefits of such encounters have often been one-sided and have reinforced inequalities (*Hartman, Paris, & Blanche-Cohen, 2014*). The term *service-learning* is itself skewed toward the academic side. It is the responsibility of the university partners to be open and responsive to unfamiliar ways of thinking and adapt to the community's context if the desired outcome is an equitable and sustainable community-driven process.

The experiences of Northern Arizona University's (NAU) Mainpat Project—a multidisciplinary response to Tibetan refugees' requests for health and other services—highlight the challenges of community–university collaboration in a remote area of India. This reflective essay presents the results of our exploratory study of community needs and potential for community change. Taking a constructivist approach, NAU students, faculty, and staff built understandings of the refugee community through gathering data (e.g., through a needs assessment and informal discussions), developing culturally determined interventions that evolved from that exploration, and reflecting on those transformative experiences to guide work in Mainpat and in their future careers. This essay explains the status of Tibetan refugees in India, the relevance of Buddhism in their survival in exile, and the character of the Mainpat Tibetan Refugee Settlement. A description of the Mainpat Project includes discipline-specific interventions and the challenges of working in a remote, culturally diverse area, and it unpacks the concepts of community and culture. Lessons learned focus on the complexities of multidisciplinary service-learning planning in a small public university's environment and the interface of a diverse host community in India with an American academic team.

## **Global Service-Learning**

Global service-learning opportunities have increased in recent decades. Students who experience the global environment through immersion service-learning projects acquire a multidimensional increase in cultural competence and personal growth (*Bringle, Clayton, & Hatcher, 2013; Kiely, 2004; Nickols, Rothenberg, Moshi, & Tetloff, 2013*). Universities include global learning as a focus in mission statements (*Whitehead, 2015*) and explore the benefits of purposeful placement of service-learning within their programs (*Phillips, Bolduc, & Gallo, 2013*). Online service experiences promote new ways of involving the students of the technological age and are increasingly integrated into university curricula (*Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012*). Recent research includes a deeper look at the interface among community, student, and university part-

nerships (*Chupp & Joseph, 2010*) and a shift of focus from community needs to community assets (*Lieberman, 2014*). Nevertheless, an understanding of the impact of service-learning on communities is incomplete or perhaps unpublished, and projects do not sufficiently promote community resiliency and self-empowerment (*Reeb & Folger, 2013*).

The voice of the host community needs to be at the core of service project planning and implementation, but achieving this goal is complicated by the power and privilege that the university holds in this relationship. *Bortolin (2011)* argues that honest self-awareness is needed in academics' stated goals for community relationships. If the primary purpose of community service-learning is to benefit the university, this should be acknowledged. If not, then the academic partner needs to engage "with communities with every effort to partner mutually with, and to the equal benefit of, our communities" (*Bortolin, 2011, p. 56*). The "give and take" in a reciprocal relationship is not feasible in most service-learning contexts that sustain a "relationship between server and served" (*Keith, 2005, p. 7*). Nevertheless, there are exceptional models and recommendations to reduce the inherent inequities between communities and the universities that attempt to work with them (e.g., *Coleman & Alonso, 2016; Crabtree, 2013; Hartman et al., 2014; Piacitelli, Barwick, Doerr, Porter, & Sumka, 2013*). There is a paucity of literature, however, that addresses the complexities of working directly with refugees and small universities' attempts to implement these strategies in very remote areas of the globe where political and social unrest, food insecurity, and severe poverty and unemployment are the norm.

## **Tibetan Refugees**

Tibet, unlike its southern neighbor India, was never colonized or modernized by a European power (*Aran, 2009*). In the early 20th century, however, Britain invaded Tibet to gain a foothold in the region, purportedly to establish trade across the Himalayas, but also to hinder Russian expansion in Asia and protect British interests in colonized India. Some argue that this "Great Game" between the superpowers enabled China's annexation of Tibet in the 1950s (*McKay, 2012*). The Chinese toppled Tibet's feudal theocracy headed by the Dalai Lama and dissolved the Kasha, its governing body. The Tibetan nationalist response to Chinese colonization was immediate and persistent resistance. After a failed 1959 uprising, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, slipped over the border to India. Many Tibetans have followed (*Aran, 2009*).

The Dalai Lama organized a government-in-exile, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), in Dharmasala. The CTA established 58 Tibetan refugee settlements: 12 in Nepal, seven in Bhutan, and 36 in India (*Central Tibetan Administration [CTA], n.d.b*), the latter guided by the Indian government, which intentionally placed refugee settlements in remote locations (*Houston & Wright, 2003*).

Tibetan uncertainties are magnified by the precariousness of their political situation. Although the Central Tibetan Administration provides them some protection, Tibetans and their offspring are rarely able to become Indian citizens, even after more than 50 years in exile. Tibetan refugees in India are left without a nation, unable to acquire an Indian passport, and considered “foreign guests” (*McConnell, 2013, p. 968*) of a government that compels them to reregister for residence permits every year, requiring them to travel far in many cases. These permits allow Tibetans to move freely within India, and they may open bank accounts and initiate businesses (*McConnell, 2013*). Without Indian citizenship, however, refugees have not been able to buy land, take out loans, gain access to expensive universities, or get good jobs. The exiles live in constant fear of deportation and political imprisonment (*Falcone & Wangchuk, 2008*). This changed in October 2014. The Indian government’s *Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy 2014* clarifies that Tibetans may now “undertake economic activity and to that extent, relevant papers/trade license/permit may be issued to them” (*CTA, 2014, para. 3*). This policy directs individual states to sign new 20-year revocable leases on land occupied by Tibetan refugees throughout India (*Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, 2015*).

Despite the relative protection of isolation, Tibetan émigrés suffered serious hardships. Tulku Tsori Rinpoche, who was born in India and founded the Mainpat Tsori Monastery, recounts being kidnapped as a child and sold into slavery. Indeed, many Tibetan refugees report traumatic experiences: survival trauma, which includes scarcity of food, medical care, employment, and housing; ethnic stress, which encompasses both discrimination and worry over loss of culture and identity; and uncertainty, which involves feelings of deprivation, injustice, and insecurity about the future (*Hussain & Bhushan, 2011*). Tibetan refugees suffer considerable psychological distress subsequent to their traumatic experiences in Tibet (*Sachs, Rosenfeld, Lhewa, Rasmussen, & Keller, 2008*), though some literature suggests that ethnic Tibetans born in exile experience fewer depressive symptoms than those who were born in Tibet and escaped to India (*Evans et al., 2008*).

## The Buddhist Connection

One important factor that promotes coping and mitigates the stress of the dispossessed is Tibetans' intense devotion to Buddhism (Hussain & Bhushan, 2011; Marwah & Soni, 2010). Buddhist unifying values create a cultural commonality, psychological anchor, and social bond that give meaning to traumatic situations and enhance Tibetans' ability to adapt in exile. Tibetan Buddhism has a distinct personal orientation revolving around lamas, the relatively few monks who have attained the highest levels of spiritual mastery. Lamas act as guides, teachers, interpreters of experience, and shamans (Aran, 2009). An incarnate lama may be given the honorific title of Rinpoche (literally, "precious one"), as is the case in Mainpat.

Tulku Tsori Rinpoche is the spiritual leader of the Tsori Monastery, which serves as both the religious and political hub of the Mainpat Refugee Settlement. He also heads a foundation based in Miami, Florida, Yogi Tsonu Dechen Rinpoche Foundation (YTDR), and travels the world to raise funds to increase the Tsori Monastery's capacity to educate young monks, promote the preservation of Tibetan culture, and support the Mainpat community.

## The Mainpat Project

**Mainpat Tibetan Refugee Settlement.** The Mainpat Tibetan refugee settlement was established in 1962 (CTA, *n.d.a*). It consists of seven villages, referred to as camps, about 50 kilometers from the nearest town, Ambikapur, in the state of Chhattisgarh, which is reached via a dirt road, usually by riding the daily bus, hiring a jeep, or driving a motorbike. Like many parts of India, Chhattisgarh is composed of many indigenous communities. The Indian communities adjacent to the Tibetan camps represent multiple discrete cultures. Hindi is the national language, but most people speak a Chhattisgarhi dialect, as well as local tribal languages, such as Telugu and Odia.

The Tsori Monastery, near one of the camps, includes a dormitory for young male monks in training, a temple, classrooms, and several other structures. This was the location for the annual visits of the NAU team, whose participants camped on the monastery grounds, gathered in the temple to listen to *Dharma* talks given each morning by Rinpoche, and became immersed in the Tibetan Buddhist culture.

The Indian government allows the Tibetan refugees access to plots of agricultural land. Interwoven between these Tibetan-run parcels are small Indian villages, although this separation may be

no more than the dirt road; the demarcation is easily detected visually by the presence of Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags, both ubiquitous and paramount to Tibetan culture (Gold, 1984). In contrast, most Indian people are Hindu.

In the winter's dry season, the roads are easy to navigate, and many of the young adult Tibetans travel to large Indian cities to engage in sweater selling or clothes trading (Prost, 2008). During this colder and drier season, the elderly continue to live at home. Younger school-aged children often attend Tibetan-run schools in other parts of India. During this time, the fields produce crops, typically buckwheat, mustard, and Niger seed, that are harvested and prepared for sale. Many of the local native residents work the fields, not the Tibetans. During the rainy season, roads become difficult to traverse. Farmers plant rainy-season crops, such as rice. Health problems associated with standing water, especially malaria, increase. It should be noted that the Mainpat Project did not take place during the rainy season, nor did the project team directly observe the extent of change in landscape and the shift in community needs at this time.

The ultimate, highest form of generosity is the giving of wisdom—*dharma*—to eliminate most causes of suffering and to eliminate ignorance. (Tulku Tsori Rinpoche, personal communication, December 22, 2012)

**Development of the Mainpat Project.** In 2010, Rinpoche's travels took him to Sedona, Arizona. During this trip, he brought to the forefront the plight of the Mainpat refugees, especially the lack of health care and the risk of rabies spread by the large population of free-roaming dogs. In response to his request, a volunteer group of health care providers and specialists in rabies eradication assembled and went to Mainpat. Representatives from NAU joined in this initial commitment.

In the 50-year existence of the Tibetan refugee settlement at Mainpat, no one had provided dental care. Additionally, two wind turbines that had been donated by another agency were in place but not connected to a generator and, therefore, not capable of supplying energy. Tulku Tsori Rinpoche invited NAU to provide support that would enhance the quality of life of the Mainpat refugees and the people at the Tsori Monastery.

This was an opportunity for a life-altering educational experience for NAU students and faculty. A novel model conceived by NAU, the Mainpat Project, attracted faculty and staff from all

academic colleges at NAU. College deans across campus learned of this multidisciplinary global service-learning project from the dean who participated in the original trip. Initially, three colleges—Health and Human Services; Engineering, Forestry and Natural Sciences; and Social and Behavioral Sciences—volunteered to participate. Professors obtained NAU institutional review board (IRB) approvals for research, and the deans put up funds to support their respective teams (dental hygiene, sustainable communities, and mechanical engineering) for the first trip in December 2011. The project continued through 2015 with participation from different colleges and departments, depending on funding and interest. Every year, 2011 through 2015, approvals for NAU's visits and service were obtained from Tulku Tsoni Rinpoche, and through him, approvals from the seven camp leaders and community clinic director; the local Indian governmental office; the government of India; and the Central Tibetan Administration.

Each year, 15 to 32 students, faculty, staff, and American community volunteers visited Mainpat. The composition of the groups varied from year to year based on the changing nature of the community's needs and departments' shifts in funding priorities. Faculty and students devised smaller, innovative strategies for funding, including student-initiated fund-raisers and solicitations for donations from local and regional community partners. Colleges and some funders also supported underrepresented student participation, enhancing student access to a costly program.

Despite NAU's limited infrastructure, the university is uniquely situated to work with culturally diverse communities, and this academic culture enhanced faculty and student preparation for the Mainpat experience. For example, due to its proximity to American Indian nations, NAU's Center for American Indian Resilience (CAIR) works in tandem with tribal communities to examine community assets (such as elders' wisdom), build capacity and resilience, and apply knowledge from research to benefit regional communities in culturally appropriate contexts. Their projects support NAU students as they engage with their communities to apply the knowledge and strategies that they have learned (CAIR, 2017).

**Predeparture preparation.** To prepare for the project, faculty in each discipline selected students from pools of interested candidates through a competitive application process. Screening criteria included demonstrated success in their academic programs, experience in community-related projects, cultural competence in working with diverse communities, and a clear commitment to a team-based, multidisciplinary approach to service-learning.

Professors obtained IRB approvals for the initial needs assessment and collection of health data in Mainpat. Other professors and community members with various expertise offered educational in-services and cultural competency training to the entire group. Topics included both Tibetan and Indian history and social structures, Buddhism, infectious diseases and vaccines, the correct use of pit toilets and other logistics, and the use of the Mainpat Project's blog and online platform (Blackboard Learn) for sharing information. Students in each discipline sought donations or conducted fund-raisers to obtain supplies. Participants obtained passports and visas that needed to be approved by the Indian government so that they could then apply to the Central Tibetan Administration for Protected Area Permits (PAPs) to access the refugee settlement. For a large group of students and faculty, this process took 6 to 9 months. In 2014, PAPs could be obtained from the Indian government directly, and this facilitated the process. After arrival at the Mainpat settlement, the local government's administrative office verified participants' permits before they began their work.

**Travel to a remote area.** Work in a remote area poses logistical challenges, but the journey itself is a significant part of the learning opportunity. When it takes 32 hours of airline, bus, and jeep travel with medical, dental, and engineering supplies over difficult terrain, students and faculty come to appreciate the level of separation experienced by some people, like the Tibetan refugees, from the rest of the world. On return trips, the project team went through Varanasi, considered the spiritual capital of India, where, at nearby Sarnath, now an important pilgrimage site, Buddha delivered his first sermons after gaining enlightenment, and where Hindu funeral rites are performed on the shores of the Ganges. Although brief, this 3-day visit afforded a glimpse into Indian culture.

**Discipline-specific interventions.** Over the next 4 years, NAU sent teams of students and faculty mentors from the fields of dental hygiene, nursing, physician assistant studies, public health, engineering, sustainable communities, forestry, photojournalism, English, and business. Faculty and students from the NAU sustainable communities' graduate program conducted a needs assessment prior to planning community interventions. They collected data from all seven camps and reported responses from over 50 qualitative interviews with Tibetan refugees and camp leaders. The refugees identified issues that revolved around energy, deforestation and fuels, safe water, organic gardening, infectious and chronic diseases, and economic development.

The students and faculty in the health professions provided care both to the Tibetan refugees and to residents of the Indian communities who came to the clinics. The dental hygiene team members were in continuous demand. Each year they served between 350 and 400 clients in 7 days, including the 54 monks at the Tsori Monastery. Dental hygiene students and faculty provided cleanings and fluoride treatments, and assisted the dentist with extractions and the treatment of dental caries, as well as periodontal and other diseases. Nursing students completed health screenings and created electronic records of baseline health data that they gave to the Tibetan nurses for their records. They conducted vision clinics where they distributed reading glasses and sunglasses, and they addressed health complaints such as back pain and joint pain. Physician assistant students also provided health screenings and distributed medications, including typhoid vaccinations, vitamin A supplementation to children under 5 years of age, and albendazole to treat gastrointestinal parasites. They referred severe cases of some diseases, such as active tuberculosis, to a regional hospital. Public health students offered education on the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, reproductive health, water sanitation, diet, diabetes management, and infectious and chronic disease prevention. They also provided rabies education and assisted an acupuncturist with a pain management clinic.

Other project teams responded to needs identified by the community. The environmental engineering team assessed the drinking water collection and distribution system at selected points for water contamination. The mechanical engineers developed and expanded the solar electrical system at the Tsori Monastery and trained several of the older monks in basic problem management and repair. The solar energy source provided power to light half of the Tsori Monastery by the end of the visit. The engineers plan to expand access to energy to the rest of the settlement. The forestry team was also involved with energy, primarily with concerns around the rapid depletion of wood for fuel. They compiled data on agroforestry techniques and deforestation, and they provided educational sessions on caring for and protecting trees. Rinpoche reported that the loss of Tibetan culture was a problem and suggested ways to promote its preservation. As a consequence, the photojournalism team used photography, interviews, and videotaping to produce several documentaries to preserve Tibetan culture and educate potential funders. As per Rinpoche's request, the graduate student in English taught English reading skills to the monks and the

children in the area, and the business school assessed economic infrastructure.

A multidisciplinary family emerged as students from different disciplines worked together on each other's projects. During some years, a multidisciplinary debriefing and information exchange helped students adapt approaches and anticipate needs for subsequent outreach and clinics. For example, the forestry team explained a framework for understanding the health impact of land use to other project participants. The nursing team joined public health students to explain a low-cost birth control technique to the Tibetan staff at the Indian hospital. One nurse said that she would make a poster about the technique to explain to clients and other staff. To manage one dental clinic that was overwhelmed by an influx of young Indians from a neighboring school, the dental hygiene team faculty leader trained the public health team to administer fluoride treatment, and the yard of the meeting house outside the clinic area served as an expanded-scale "clinic" for these patients.

## **Project Challenges**

The project participants entered the Mainpat Project with an honest intent to respond to the community's requests for assistance. The group's ignorance of the complex and shifting social and political structure, however, diminished the potential benefit. The situation posed an even more important question: Did the Tibetans want the project team's services? Though they thanked the participants multiple times for coming and for the services provided, it is possible that some refugees felt obligated to be polite to foreigners who had traveled thousands of miles, or to honor the wishes of community leaders. The impact of privilege and decision-making power became obvious. There may also have been problems with translation, particularly during the needs assessment. How much did participants from the host community feel comfortable saying in front of their leaders and the interpreters? Each of the seven camps had a leader, and members continually referred to the position or opinion of their leader rather than sharing their individual opinions.

**Community participation in planning.** Community participation during the preparation phase was essential, but communication to organize the trip and plan with the community was challenging between visits. Rinpoche made several trips to the United States and met with the project participants to review and approve

ideas for intervention. In the months following his trips, however, there would be no response to inquiries, and it is doubtful that any community involvement took place beyond the monastery. Rinpoche made trips to other sites, including locations in Nepal, for which he was responsible. During that time, telephone and Internet communications were impossible. His secretary, who was a key connection in providing information, died of malaria during the initial stages of the implementation of the Mainpat Project. There were no backup contacts in India with whom to plan. Even when Rinpoche was in Mainpat, other pressing needs, such as damage to the Tsori Monastery and community structures caused by the typhoon in 2014, required his full attention. Based on limited information, then, the project team often had to make an educated guess as to the next year's most pressing issues.

**Concept of community.** The project team worked with Rinpoche to determine initial priority needs. Rinpoche's role as both a religious and political leader made him an important gatekeeper and negotiator with the Central Tibetan Administration, the camp leaders, and the local Indian government. The needs assessment conducted in 2011 also provided guidance for prioritizing the Tibetans' problems, but it provided little information about the status of the Indian communities. Compared to the Tibetan refugees, local Mainpat Indian communities are at an economic and social disadvantage. Indian communities adjacent to the Tibetan camps had needs as well, but some communities had a strained relationship with the refugees. Living conditions around Mainpat are extremely poor, and there are few opportunities for employment. Rural inhabitants are now migrating to urban areas like Mumbai and Kolkata in search of work, which further complicates existing problems (*Abbas & Varma, 2014*). This rural-to-urban migration occurs in both the Indian and Tibetan communities. The initial population of Mainpat was approximately 2,000 (*CTA, n.d.a*) but is dwindling as more and more young people leave the settlement.

At first, political antagonisms strained the issue of providing services to the Indians. In the first year of the Mainpat Project, an Indian family brought their daughter to the clinic. She was very sick, and the medical team could do nothing for her other than recommend that she be taken to the hospital. She died later. This prompted the question: If something goes wrong, what are the repercussions and for whom? After the NAU team leaves, what do Rinpoche and the local community leaders have to deal with? Rinpoche wanted to help both Tibetan and Indian communities

but did not want to increase preexisting misunderstandings and tensions.

Ultimately, however, Rinpoche supported offering services to any of the Indian communities who requested them. The NAU health providers supported this decision, but it complicated planning in another way. Supplies had to be apportioned for each Tibetan camp. During a typhoid immunization effort, for example, Rinpoche instructed the NAU and Tibetan nurses to immunize not only the monks and Tibetan community, but also arrivals to the clinic from the Indian community. The nurses also made a special trip to immunize a local Indian politician and his family who had been very supportive of the Tibetan community. Although the health care team believed that this was the right thing to do, they exhausted the supply of typhoid vaccinations earlier than anticipated.

Another challenge in defining community was trying to discern the representativeness of the community needs assessment. It was not clear whether the issues raised by Rinpoche were the same as those of the seven camp leaders. Community members may have agreed with what Rinpoche suggested out of respect. As outsiders, the NAU team could not identify all of the stakeholders and were not privy to any internal tensions or disputes among the camps. Because the camps were composed of Tibetans from different parts of Tibet, they differed not only in size and composition, but also in customs and traditions. Some spoke dialects that others did not understand. Some were strict vegetarians and others ate meat. Residents closest to the Tsori Monastery benefited from easier access to health care; from more distant areas, travel over poor roads by bus or motorbike was necessary. There also appeared to be competition between camps with regard to the settlement's organic farming project and other issues.

Although thought and preparation went into the needs assessment, it was performed in haste due to limited communication and a short time on site. There was not sufficient opportunity to capture data and observations outside the scope of the survey. The translators guided some of the interaction, so their perspectives likely influenced what the teams observed. The translators were exceptionally skilled, but they were not representative of the entire community. The academic teams needed more time to assess the community, develop deeper relationships to ensure clear documentation of shifting needs, and strengthen opportunities for program sustainability.

**Timing and cultural competency.** The university determined the timing of NAU's visits. The team was entrapped in an academic calendar and guided by administrative requirements to schedule travel over winter break, even though this was an imposition on the Tibetan refugees. The project team avoided India's rainy season (in summer months) and the complications that this would bring (a heightened risk of exposure to malaria-infected mosquitoes and an increased likelihood of not completing intended projects due to the problems of accessibility or the delivery of goods in adequate condition). This was not, however, the time that worked best for the camps or the monastery. The NAU team arrived during harvest time and set up clinics that either drew workers away from the fields or precluded their participation altogether. This timing particularly impacted the poorer Indian communities. Although Tibetans are involved in agricultural activities, they hire Indians to do much of the hard labor in the field. At one point, the project's clinics conflicted with a religious ceremony. Also during this time, young people were away from the settlement selling sweaters in the city. This defeated plans to provide instruction on family planning and HIV prevention—topics that Rinpoche had requested. Most of the residents, therefore, were elderly and had different needs from a number of those identified by Rinpoche in preliminary meetings with NAU.

The organization of clinics was challenging. Local translators worked with camp leaders to schedule services. There was no way to determine whether they, too, deferred to the project's needs rather than those of the community. For example, when setting up services in the different camps, project participants asked, "Is Wednesday or Thursday a better time?" Though well-intentioned, this could have been translated as, "They're coming on Wednesday. Okay?" Although the Tibetans could not have been more gracious, the team suspected that they made accommodations out of respect.

**Complexities of implementation.** The remoteness of the location contributed to the project team's sense of urgency and purpose of the work, but it created numerous challenges. For example, each academic unit developed a plan, but these were sometimes impossible to complete in one visit. In 2011, the engineering team proposed an energy system for the Tsori Monastery that relied on equipment that was ordered well before NAU's departure. The distributors were in-country, but the equipment did not arrive until 2 years later. In 2013, the engineering team was able to complete part of the energy system it had designed, but not without further complications. During the 2013 visit, a serious international cul-

tural affront took place in New York City, where a female Indian diplomat was arrested and strip-searched. Anti-American demonstrations erupted throughout India, even in remote areas of the country, and the engineering team had to postpone travel to a nearby town to collect supplies until emotions stabilized. There also existed a rarely mentioned but real risk of being caught up in local political violence. Mainpat is considered inside the “Red Corridor” of the recent Naxalite-Maoist insurgency.

The nursing team brought supplies to be used at the Tibetan clinic. One nursing faculty member wanted to sustain support after the team left and was in e-mail contact with a Tibetan clinic nurse, but the clinic did not yet have telemedicine capability. The Tibetan nurses decided that the NAU nurse would send one package with wound care supplies as a trial, but the package arrived at the clinic opened and with sterile equipment contaminated. The Tibetan nurse suspected the behavior of corrupt postal service employees and suggested that it was not safe to send anything else, as things frequently got stolen; the plan to develop a system of sending field material kits was discontinued. A better option might have been to identify a reliable source in-country, but as evidenced by the engineering example, this may be a complicated process.

Train-the-trainer efforts were also a challenge. Many potential in-country trainers were not available or had more pressing priorities. Since the community identified problems with waterborne diseases, public health students attempted to train potential trainers to improve the quality of water used for cooking. The team demonstrated use of cooking thermometers to test whether water was boiled to a temperature adequate to kill waterborne pathogens. The Tibetan nurse seemed very enthusiastic about the concept and trained others in the community to use them. In later years, the NAU team could not ascertain whether these instruments were used by the community, answers to questions about them were vague, and none were seen during subsequent visits.

Navigating the rabies prevention efforts was complex. According to Rinpoche, rabies was a serious problem in Mainpat. According to the World Health Organization, 36% of the world's rabies deaths occur in India; many people, especially in rural areas, do not know what the disease is or how to treat it (*Kole, Roy, & Kole, 2014*). The team's door-to-door interviews in the seven camps, however, gave no indication of a problem with dog bites. Nevertheless, the veterinary team performed vaccinations on dogs due to the virulence of rabies, dogs' frequent contact with wild animals, and the lack of access to medical treatment if humans were bitten. The

team provided follow-up boosters a year later. One critical concern, however, was that veterinarians who had joined the group asked students to handle the dogs, despite the students' lack of training to do so. They also asked children to bring dogs to the clinic. This highlighted a lack of thought regarding unintended consequences for the community, with a potentially serious outcome.

The NAU team received conflicting information about rabies in 2013, when Rinpoche reported that there had been 35 rabid dogs in the Mainpat area and one human death from a dog bite. The information was anecdotal, but given the critical nature of the disease, the team obtained rabies vaccine for the dogs in the settlement. Rinpoche arranged for dog handlers from the local community to vaccinate the dogs the day after NAU's departure, but there was no apparent follow-through. In 2014, another veterinarian joined the NAU group to check on the rabies problem and other canine diseases. Unfortunately, there was a lack of communication; the veterinarian did not know that some dogs had been microchipped, and some of the dogs received unneeded rabies boosters.

## **Lessons Learned**

The Mainpat Project participants tried to respond to needs identified by the community, apply theoretically sound strategies for intervention in a global context, and adapt the program by learning from mistakes made, both in-country and in preparing for the next year's visits. This approach, however, set the stage for misunderstandings and challenges for both the community and for the NAU team. Is it possible for a small-university-based service-learning project to embrace cultural humility and put communities first or at least on an equal footing? The project staff helped some individuals resolve short-term problems but did little to mitigate the health and social inequities between their world and ours. How should service-learning projects respond to problems amid so many? Dr. Luis Fernandez, one of the 2011 participants, summarized the issue. The project team could address the more immediate problems by situating ourselves in the deeper, more embedded problems of the culture:

The world is messy. . . . You need to understand that you will not understand the location, regardless of prior experiences and world travel. You are going to make mistakes. Americans are problem-solvers. For Tibetans, it's about a process. The problems in India and Tibet have lasted for centuries. They will not be resolved in

one visit or even a series of visits. (*L. Fernandez, personal communication, July 7, 2015*)

If, as outsiders, service-learning project participants cannot understand these remote, culturally complex communities, they are at risk of serving their own needs more than developing interdependent and meaningful partnerships. Efforts “sometimes result in the opposite of what participants hope to accomplish” (*Crabtree, 2013, p. 49*). However, the specific lessons to be gleaned from this experience can improve plans for future work in these “messy” global relationships.

Addressing messes requires a tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict and a willingness to test strategies whose results cannot be known with any degree of certainty in advance. (*McNall, Barnes-Najor, Brown, Doberneck, & Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 6*)

Two major areas for improvement emerged that have been discussed elsewhere in the literature (e.g., *Crabtree, 2013; McNall et al., 2015; Reiff & Keene, 2012*): (1) predeparture planning and (2) community participation.

**Predeparture planning.** Sustained university commitment, especially during predeparture and reentry, is essential at every level (*Crabtree, 2013*) and requires “systemic engagement” (*McNall et al., 2015, p. 2*). Although preparatory strategies had been implemented throughout the year, they were insufficient and, in some cases, uninformed. As the program proceeded, shifts in internal leadership and involvement of different entities at the university contributed to incomplete internal communication, less attention to careful participant selection, and inadequate cultural competency training. Even with rigorous vetting of students and faculty, it was impossible to anticipate personal problems and agendas that would emerge in the remote and demanding environment of rural India. In the future, the project team needs to create better contingency plans to respond to participants’ experiences, not only when exposed to a completely new culture, but also when situated in a remote area from which it is very complicated or impossible to extricate themselves. How would the team send students or faculty back to the United States if they were being culturally insensitive or disrespectful? Cultural insensitivity can be a source of long-lasting damage within a community. Actions in-country also have significant consequences for future global service programs, for

the university's credibility, and for faculty members' research, service, or promotion if their projects are interrupted (*Crabtree, 2013*). University policy changes need to address this issue.

Sustained participation in a labor-intensive project, however, requires university engagement at multiple levels (*Chupp & Joseph, 2010*). An effective service-learning project must meet both the expectations of the community and the standards of the institution, and collaborations present "wicked" problems (*Ramaley, 2014*). Financial and temporal commitments of this magnitude, however, may not be feasible at a small public university.

**Student concerns.** Students in the Mainpat Project earned course credit in the semesters prior to, during, and after the project's end, but the time commitment in preparatory activities far exceeded the credit hours, and course credits were not an integral part of the disciplines' curricula. In the future, course credits should fulfill requirements of the discipline through an alternative track. Empathy training is invaluable (*Everhart, 2016*) and could mitigate on-site instances of discomfort or cultural insensitivity. Preparatory education, such as training in cultural competency and humility, should be required of all students and faculty. Official course credit and service requirements for these special educational trainings could ensure that "learners have reflective opportunities and resources to explore growth in their understandings of themselves as individuals capable of responsible and ethical behavior in global context" (*Hartman et al., 2014, p. 113*). More time for predeparture and on-site debriefing to examine cultural bias and culture shock, reflection, and self-evaluation of the project's impact (e.g., unintended ecological footprint, displacement of the monks) could improve community-participant outcomes and better inform future planning.

**Faculty concerns.** Service is an expectation for faculty, but research activity is emphasized for promotion and tenure. Faculty could benefit from release time for development of these projects, as well as financial remuneration, so that research obligations can be met. A new scholarly agenda that includes community engagement is needed (*Ramaley, 2014*). Faculty also need time to develop a collaborative network of supportive partnerships and prepare participants for engagement. The Global Health Institute (*n.d.*) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is a well-funded community-university collaborative that involves local leaders and other community stakeholders in planning, research, and information dissemination. The program requires that all participants receive rigorous orientation in the United States and intensive cultural

training in-country. There must also be time to include the community at all levels of preparation, development, and evaluation, and a culture in which partners create something new together: “Student learning and community goals must reinforce and inform one another. Either is undermined by the absence of the other” (Hartman *et al.*, 2014, p. 112). Faculty working with future Mainpat Project endeavors should enhance the community’s voice and participation through improved contact and involvement. To be successful, project design and development efforts must be community-driven. “Community engagement, learning, program design, and budgeting should all include significant community direction, feedback, and opportunities for iterative improvements” (Hartman *et al.*, 2014, p. 112).

**University concerns.** The university’s diverse administrative offices also need to be fully engaged in global service-learning (Ramaley, 2014). Legal counsel should ensure that all policies protect the host communities and the students, faculty, administrators, and university. The university should coordinate a strong network of collaborations, reliable funding sources, and approved policies and clear communication of them before project development. In the Mainpat Project, changes in protocol complicated planning. For example, in an effort to be inclusive, one administrative office postponed the deadlines for students’ completion of applications and visas. Departments and administrative offices also delayed funding commitments. Improving a university-wide organization and infrastructure for project support with buy-in from all participating departments will facilitate future work in Mainpat.

**Community participation and impact.** Host communities should be equal partners in the planning process and guide the project’s goals (Bertaux, Smythe, & Crable, 2012; Crabtree, 2013; Hartman & Kiely, 2014; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2002). Community participation cannot be sustained if contact with key leaders is not possible for months at a time. This is not under the control of either the project participants or the community. D’Arlach, Sánchez, and Feuer (2009) explain that there will be awkward encounters in any project development process, and they suggest that these negative experiences can motivate communities to address problems themselves and even build empowerment. To address this challenge, universities should be flexible, as time is needed to develop community trust, build extended relationships within the community, and focus on community-asset-based solutions to ensure sustainable change in the community (Fitzgerald, Allen, & Roberts, 2010).

Communities must be involved from the start to ensure social justice and equitable sharing of power and resources.

Communication is also critical to establish clear understandings of each partner's roles, abilities, limitations, and goals. Once a community identifies problems with which it needs assistance, the needs may not be what a project can or should address. For example, in Mainpat, problems with leaky roofs were the most widespread complaint. Poor housing is linked to poor health outcomes, but it is inefficient to bring students to Mainpat to fix leaky roofs. Does asking residents their priority needs then commit a project to respond to those needs? In situations where there are already substantial cultural and language differences, the process of a needs assessment itself could be misinterpreted as a commitment to fix the problems. There is a greater issue at stake here. Hartman and Kiely (2014) emphasize the need to "approach knowledge and action with deep humility" (p. 234) to acknowledge "common human dignity" (p. 237). To honor the community, expectations on both sides should be clear before a project starts.

Interventions should be relevant to the community. In Mainpat, however, the value of interventions differed substantially among stakeholders. Rinpoche encouraged both preventive measures and health care intervention. The community valued tooth extractions and pain relief highly, but some residents did not necessarily see dental cleaning as a high priority. Teeth cleaning is easily accomplished, but preventive medicine from an American perspective is not a way of life in this population. In some cultures, food and prayer are preventive medicine. Should a project goal include "train the trainer" exercises if the community has more pressing needs? The dental hygiene faculty decided to train Tibetan nurses and the head monk at the Tsori Monastery in fluoride application and appropriate tooth-brushing techniques. There has been no feedback from them after NAU's visits, and responses to inquiries continue to be vague. In 2014, however, the project team observed a number of Mainpat residents brushing their teeth with the toothbrushes that had been left from previous years' visits. Rinpoche supported this effort, the experience was a good learning opportunity for students, and dental hygiene supports good health in general. The team provided dental cleanings, therefore, even though it was not identified in the needs assessment.

Despite having a list of problems identified through the needs assessment, the NAU team remains unsure what the community really wanted and whether the team's interventions were useful. It is possible that some community members accepted our interven-

tions out of courtesy rather than need. It is also possible that our providing services to some of the community (those who were in Mainpat in December) and not to others contributed to internal tensions and jealousies between residents (*Crabtree, 2013*). The Mainpat Project participants were perhaps ultimately considered more of a stressor on community function. Rinpoche was already burdened by management of settlements in Mainpat and Nepal, yet he graciously took on management of logistics. Rinpoche acted as our liaison with the local government and camp leaders. He arranged bus transportation from the airport to Mainpat (12 to 14 hours), the jeeps and drivers to the seven refugee camps, and the translators. He assigned several monks to care for the team's needs. Rinpoche bought bottled water and food and hired a cook to prepare meals. At his behest, the team displaced the monks by setting up tents and sleeping bags in their classrooms and using their bathrooms. The NAU team used too much of the scarce electricity and too much water, and produced garbage that the monks had to burn. Rinpoche purchased toilet paper, and despite predeparture education on latrine etiquette, some NAU participants put the paper in the toilets. This blocked the latrines that several team members then unclogged. The monastery and community were disrupted by NAU's visit. The team paid for the services and supplies, yet in the end, even Rinpoche admitted that the trip had likely benefited NAU more than the community.

It is important to help a host community discover value for its own assets and resources (*D'Arlach et al., 2009; Lieberman, 2014*), and the NAU team hoped to support the Mainpat settlement's empowerment. However, "empowerment cannot be bestowed upon an individual or group; it is something that must grow from within" (*Darling, Kerr, Thorp, & Chung, 2014, p. 34*). How does one support empowerment in a community that has a religious leader? Do such communities want empowerment as an American envisions it? Sometimes a community wants immediate care before prevention. Sometimes train-the-trainer efforts are not the community's priority. They have no time for this when faced with more pressing challenges of food insecurity, unemployment, and political and social unrest—larger problems over which a small public university service-learning project has little, if any, impact.

Most of the Tibetan refugees, however, humbled the NAU team with their gratitude. Old men and women bowed in thanks. Several residents, including one camp leader, thanked the team for keeping them in our thoughts and remembering their historic struggle against Chinese occupation. These elders are the last survivors of

the desperate emigration from occupied Tibet; they crossed the Himalayas on foot, taking months to arrive in this remote area of India. Perhaps a foundation for trust was initiated in the short time allowed by the project participants' visits, and support for these Tibetan refugees in India was achieved through other means:

the power of witnessing, the catharsis of sharing stories, the ability of our presence to draw attention to forgotten places and situations, the way one project can be a local catalyst beyond our visit and unrelated to our intentions, and the deep significance of accompaniment through living and working side by side. (*Crabtree, 2013, p. 61*)

Those who wish to continue the Mainpat Project need more time to embed themselves in the community, to live and work side by side, in order to understand next steps.

### **What's Next?**

There are multiple opportunities for application of lessons learned in Mainpat if the community wants the NAU team to return. The lessons learned can serve as motivation to encourage further work with appropriate preparation and dedication to equitable engagement with the community. It is undoubtedly true that in the short term, NAU students and faculty benefited more than the Tibetan community. The question now is, what changes can take place in the next 5 to 10 years, both in the relationship with the Mainpat community and within NAU?

A first step is to approach the community with a new sense of humility to reestablish the Mainpat-NAU partnership in a more meaningful way. This involves a community-assets approach to build capacity and develop an equitable power-sharing infrastructure. Northern Arizona University should examine sustainable models. The social ecological model has proved successful in rural communities (e.g., *Coleman & Alonso, 2016*) and would be appropriate for Mainpat. In authentic partnerships, such as the California Breast Cancer Research Program and the Community Research Grants program, there is time for partners to develop trust and understanding before submitting a project proposal. They acknowledge the need to build infrastructure, clarify principles of participation, and work toward a collective agenda to avoid unequal distribution of power and resources (*Community Partner Summit Group, 2010*). Communities need the capacity and motivation to

mobilize, and universities need to view themselves as part of the community and to work with the community to effect meaningful change (*Fitzgerald et al., 2010*). Perhaps the next trip back to Mainpat should include only time for listening, developing relationships, and embedding students and faculty within the community to develop knowledge through patience with the environment and openness to personal experiences. The same group could return the subsequent year. In this way, a service-learning project may evolve to a community engagement model to address project longevity and sustainability of community change. Green (2014) suggests involving the global partners as coeducators in framing student learning objectives, a goal that acknowledges their insights and experience. Along with in-depth needs assessments and continuous reevaluation, work needs to focus on the assets and capacities of the Tibetan and surrounding community to work with existing infrastructure and facilitate a framework for building resilience. At this point, the project's impact on the community is uncertain. Next trips to Mainpat must include a community-directed assessment of community benefit of NAU's involvement.

Concurrently, the university should examine its commitment to costly and complex multidisciplinary global projects. For a small university, the infrastructure needs for a project like Mainpat can be daunting. Given the problem of fewer government dollars for higher education, Maurrasse (2010) suggests turning to private philanthropy and forming collaborations across institutions. Interinstitutional collaboration would require leadership buy-in and cooperation among institutional entities. Though this type of collaboration is rare, it is possible. Time to build trusting and mutually beneficial relationships applies here. A small university with unique relationships with communities like Mainpat can be an asset to a larger university with existing global resources and infrastructure.

Within NAU, faculty and students can benefit from guidance in the value of listening to the community and to each other, to develop relationships and build a sustainable project together. Empathy training exercises and deep reflection before, during, and after project participation are essential. Green (2014) emphasized that reflection assignments are as important as learning activities. In lieu of different disciplines creating interventions independent of each other, students and faculty who practice listening—first to the community, then to each other—are more likely to build a predeparture plan that is community-driven and collaboratively constructed.

## Conclusion

This reflective essay has presented community–university interactions, challenges, intended and unintended outcomes, and lessons learned from the Mainpat Project. Future work in Mainpat can build upon lessons learned in situ and apply best practices from existing models of global service-learning, including listening to the community with humility and affirming its strengths.

Rinpoche's talks laid out three elements of generosity: One is sharing what you possess—food, clothing and shelter. The second is extending protection and security. The third and most important form of generosity is giving knowledge, being a teacher. After my visits to Mainpat, I concluded there exists a fourth kind of generosity, one that Rinpoche never mentioned directly, but which resonates in his teachings: supplying affirmation. We went to a place very few foreigners visit. We corroborated the people's plight and confirmed their struggle. We recognized them, shared their rice and *balep* bread, saluted their accomplishments, attended their needs, acknowledged their stories, and affirmed their dignity. Our health impact may be small. The affirmation effect, on the other hand, feels enormous. (*E. Curtis, personal communication, July 31, 2016*)

Due to funding limitations and other complications within a small university infrastructure, the Mainpat Project has ended. Nevertheless, some former project participants continue communications with the monks through Facebook and video conversations. Multidisciplinary relationships have also continued among students and faculty at NAU. A collaborative team from public health, nursing, dental hygiene, and photojournalism presented posters about Mainpat at the Undergraduate Symposium Honors' Day. The dental hygiene students who participated in the Mainpat project also successfully reached out to the larger dental community with well-received table clinics presented each year at the annual sessions of the Arizona Dental Association. Students presented their experiences at the Southwest Institute for Learning with Technology, and data from the health assessments were shared with Rinpoche. The contributions of the photojournalism team promoted awareness of the Mainpat community, preserved Tibetan culture, and possibly garnered new support for future generations of Tibetan refugees. Whereas the Tibetans in Mainpat do not have

the power to vote or affect local politics, Americans do. The effort that is required for a project of this magnitude and level of complexity may plant the seed that leads to an enhanced quality of life for others.

If we put out a seed, rejoice. Participate in the act to benefit all generations—place the seed where many will get enlightenment. (*Tulku Tsori Rinpoche, personal communication, December 22, 2012*)

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