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More than Dough:

Students Advise Local Bakery on Business Brigade In Honduras

Jan. 8, 2016

Story by Meghan Keeley '16

During winter break, 19 Illinois Wesleyan students, members of the university's Global Business Brigades chapter, spent a week in Honduras. Following is Meghan Keeley's first-person account of the experience. A [business administration](#) and philosophy double major from Lake Barrington, Ill., Keeley is president of IWU's Business Brigades chapter.

Great Expectations

Two Illinois State students joined 19 of us from Illinois Wesleyan on a business-related service trip to Honduras. None of us had been on a business brigade — or to Honduras — so we were unsure of what to expect. But we were all eager to learn and help wherever needed.

We went to Honduras as part of [Global Brigades](#), an international nonprofit that empowers communities to meet their health and economic goals through university volunteers and local teams. The international organization now has nine brigades including one devoted to business. IWU also has Medical, Dental and Public Health brigades, but the December trip to Honduras was the first out-of-country trip for the IWU Business Brigade.

We worked for five days in El Cantón, an agriculturally focused community in central Honduras. Other brigades before us had previously worked in El Cantón, so the community already has a microenterprise and community bank now managed by community members. It was fascinating to learn how far the community members had come since the first business brigade.



Students from IWU and Illinois State talk with bakery managers and customers.



Cam Weber '16 used his graphic design skills to create a logo for the bakery.

We worked with a bakery microenterprise that is run by five women in the community who are equally as hardworking as they were welcoming and hospitable to our group. Our overarching project for the week was to conceptualize and introduce a business strategy to improve the business and grow bakery sales and profits. Their bakery products include banana bread, vanilla bread, pineapple jam pastries and *semitas*, which are traditional Honduran sweet rolls. We learned that a staple of Honduran culture is to have a cup of coffee and sweet bread with breakfast, and again in the afternoon. While the other bakery products are considered to be more like treats, the sweet breads are a staple in many Honduran homes. We had a chance to purchase baked goods from the business each day, and it was fascinating to see how amazing their sweets tasted made outdoors in a makeshift kitchen. Our favorites were the pineapple pastries and homemade doughnuts.

Market Research

The first half of the week was dedicated to research and analysis of the bakery's current situation. We talked with bakery employees and community bank members to better understand how they keep track of accounting numbers, which are recorded by hand in notebooks. We also wanted to learn about their goals for serving the community, the progress they've made thus far, and the type of growth they're hoping to see.

High season for most businesses in Honduras is December through May, when coffee is in season. During this time, agricultural workers are in high demand to work in the fields and help produce coffee products for sale. Thus, when more community members are employed, more have extra money to make purchases like baked goods. We learned that the bakery has grown so much that during high season, they cannot keep up with the demand. Managers were hoping to find a way to increase production efficiency without the steep expenses of hiring new employees or buying more delivery vehicles. On the other hand, during the low season, they struggled to make profits because so few community members could afford to purchase baked goods.

One day we had the chance to explore the nearest small city, Teupasanti. We learned what the community members and customers liked most about the bakery, what they had hoped to see more of, and how familiar convenience store owners in Teupasanti were with the El Cantón bakery. This not only broadened our understanding of what the bakery could do to see more growth, but it also was also fascinating to immerse ourselves in the culture of the Honduran people.

The second half of the week was dedicated to presenting our suggestions to the business. Each night our group of 21 students met for more than three hours to brainstorm, discuss and weigh the options of the different possibilities we could present. The responsibility Global Brigades and the bakery managers entrusted in us — a group of college students — to present complex business strategies was something many of us did not expect. In this way, our trip ended up being as much of a study abroad experience as it was service work.

Making The Pitch

Each brigade member was responsible for raising money to go on the trip. We raised about \$2,000 more than we needed for airfare, transportation, project supplies and housing, so we also had the chance to decide how and where we would donate the excess funds to benefit the bakery. What we would present for strategy and donation could drastically change the progress of a business we had come to enormously respect and affect its managers whom we had grown close to.



Austin Wagner '17 (left) and Nick Huskisson '17 in Teupasanti.

page to include with all baked goods sold.

Lessons Learned

While developing the business strategy and deciding on the donation allocation was very helpful to our learning and the business's long-term growth, it may not have been what made the strongest impact on our group as a whole. Spending seven days in rural Honduras and working with people who live completely different lifestyles was an experience completely out of our comfort zones. We were humbled and reminded of how shallow our everyday complaints can be, when we gripe about not having WiFi or enough cash to grab the third Chipotle meal of the week. The Honduran people were the kindest, most welcoming, and friendliest people we had ever encountered. As a group, we grew much closer because we experienced such an eye-opening experience together — both in cultural immersion and in the work we put into the business.

Global Brigades provided us the opportunity to spend a week of winter break in the most eye-opening, exciting, challenging way. Our perspectives on the world's conditions and our own lifestyles changed drastically. We're thrilled that so many underclassmen enjoyed the trip, and we hope IWU students down the road will genuinely benefit from future trips just as much as we did.



Mehgan Keeley '16 plays with Derek, who lived next door to the bakery the students advised during their week in Honduras.

Our presentation broke down into two goals: improving production efficiency and increasing sales in the low season. Our strategy included restructuring production by selling different quantities of goods so that more could be produced and sold without the need for additional employees or more time spent baking. As a long-term solution for efficiency, we created an educational presentation about savings accounts and interest growth opportunities. When we arrived, the bakery was allocating all profits to employee salaries and not holding any savings for the business itself. Therefore, we worked with the business managers to explain the opportunities of allocating one percent or more to a savings account with the Community Bank. In the long run, money could be held to make purchases on additional ovens or electronic mixing machines that would make the production process more efficient. With the excess \$2,000 we're raised, our group purchased a new oven for the bakery and deposited \$1,000 to open their savings account.

The second goal — to increase demand in low season — allowed us to think more creatively. The bakery's regular customers told us repeatedly that the El Cantón bread is higher quality and lasts much longer than that from other bakeries. Our hope was that, with a recognizable logo, people would seek out their products more specifically during the low season, even if they are making purchases less frequently. So one of our group members, Cam Weber, a graphic design major at IWU, created a logo for the bakery and an information