CHAPTER 6

Real World *Survivor*: Simulating Poverty to Teach Human Rights and Sustainable Development

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Joaquin had never felt hunger like this before.[1] He was struggling to think and control his emotions while he tried to finish his share of the family's crop planting. His mind was focused on the next day, when he hoped to have a more substantial meal than the slim portion of grits he ate a few hours before. First, however, he had to get through his chores and lessons for the day.

Yet Joaquin was lucky—he was not one of the millions of young people worldwide who contends with hunger on a daily basis. Instead, he was a voluntary participant in an experiential human rights simulation at Heifer International's "Heifer Ranch" in Perryville, Arkansas. His plight was two days old and temporary; the very next day, he paused his journey home to stop at an all-you-can-eat buffet, with enough money in his pocket to eat his fill.

Human rights experts are well-equipped to expose students to issues related to poverty, inequality, and governmental neglect and oppression.

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But even the most knowledgeable educators can struggle to create courses that fully engage students, encourage empathy, or prompt changes in behavior. Experiencing even a small part of the lived experience arising from lack of daily human rights protection can have a large effect on students. To fill this educational gap, this chapter explores a unique undergraduate course at Webster University that incorporates team-teaching, experiential learning, flipped classroom, simulations, and project-based learning in order to teach students essential lessons about human rights and sustainable development. In particular, the chapter outlines how our team applies these best practices in education to teach students about fundamental rights to food, water, education, family, health, freedom of movement, and cultural participation.

"Real World *Survivor*: Experiencing Poverty at Heifer Ranch" (hereafter RWS) is taught by a team of faculty in international relations, philosophy, and education. The course is named after the reality television competition *Survivor*, where contestants are taken to a remote location and must build shelter and forage for food and water as they compete for a million-dollar prize. Real World *Survivor*, then, requires students to participate in a simulation where they live in similar conditions to people who live in the midst of poverty and food scarcity every day. (Unfortunately for our students, no million-dollar prize awaits them at the end of the simulation.)

The course is divided into three sections. First, students learn about issues in human rights and development under the framework of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The MDGs were eight broad goals set by the UN to achieve measurable gains in issues such as extreme poverty and hunger, education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, diseases, environmental sustainability, and global development. (Although the MDGs expired in 2015 and have since been replaced by the SDGs, the original version of the class focused on the MDGs. The MDGs are therefore a focus of this chapter.) Under the supervision of instructors using a variety of innovative teaching techniques, students develop their skills in oral and written communication, ethical reasoning, quantitative analysis, information literacy, teamwork, and critical thinking. The learning outcomes of the course focus on teaching students to analyze interdisciplinary perspectives on how these global problems developed, the nature of these issues today, progress toward meeting the goals, success stories, and ongoing challenges.

Accompanied by local high-school students, undergraduate students spend three days inside Heifer Ranch's Global Village, where they experience a simulation of hunger, poverty, and human rights challenges problems that are felt in various parts of the world they just studied in the classroom. Students live in replicas of the housing that families in poor regions of Guatemala, Zambia, Tibet, India, or the United States call "home." Food is restricted—and hunger is real, albeit temporary. Activities include doing chores such as gardening, foraging for firewood, milking goats, and making bricks. Sometimes students deal with crises involving natural disasters, customs officials, or police raids. Their experiences are recorded and photographed the entire time, much like in the reality television show *Survivor*. During the final section of the course, students use this footage in group projects to create a five- to eight-minute digital story on the development goal of their choice. The course concludes with the presentation of these videos at a fundraiser to support Heifer International's work.

This chapter first discusses the rationale for the course, with particular attention to the class' role as a pilot for the university's new general education program and its focus on using non-traditional teaching methods. It then turns to how the class uses cutting-edge educational practices and tools to facilitate human rights education (HRE) and to encourage empathy for people living in conditions of hunger and poverty. Finally, it engages in qualitative analysis to determine the impact of the course on students' understandings of human rights and development.

Why Real World *Survivor*?

The instructional team that created Real World *Survivor* had three primary goals. First and foremost, the course was meant to serve as an advanced and interdisciplinary introduction to contemporary issues in human rights, development, and ethics. Webster University has a strong tradition of HRE, with one of only a handful of undergraduate programs available in the United States. This course aimed at expanding the number of advanced courses that took an interdisciplinary perspective, giving students substantial training in skill areas such as communication, intercultural competence, and advocacy.

Second, the instructors aimed to create a course that could serve as a pilot "keystone seminar" to anchor the university's new general education program, under development at the time. The Global Citizenship

Program (GCP), Webster's now-award winning general education program,[2] uses such final courses to assess the content and skills learned throughout the general education curriculum. At its inception, educators acknowledged how this keystone seminar needed to be interdisciplinary and integrative, eventually leading to an experiential component. RWS thus became a pilot for the broader keystone seminar concept, designed as an experiment to see if the keystone's intended focus on global citizenship would succeed.

Global citizenship was at the forefront of the instructors' minds in creating this program. Webster University's mission articulates this idea, aimed at creating "high quality learning experiences that transform students for global citizenship and individual excellence" (Webster University, n.d.). Increased awareness of and empathy for the experiences of people around the world is at the forefront of the concept of "global citizenship," an increasingly common focus of universities (Stearns 2009; DiGeorgio-Lutz 2010; Rhoads and Szelenyi 2011; Haigh 2014). Social responsibility and community engagement are two of the most important elements of being a global citizen (Tarrant et al. 2014), and Real World *Survivor* aims at training students in both of these areas. Global learning and intercultural competence are also two of the outcomes valued by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (Whitehead 2016). Training in global citizenship as a principle of general education is therefore closely tied to HRE, since both aim to increase awareness, empathy, and action.

Finally, the instructors wanted to design a course explicitly grounded in the best pedagogies available. While the Heifer Ranch experience would by itself be a non-traditional focus for the course, the instructors wanted the instructional methods for the rest of the course to be just as innovative. This was partly due to having an education faculty member on the team, but also because we intended to cross-list the class in education, human rights, international relations, and philosophy.[3] More importantly, active-learning techniques have a long and effective history in the social sciences as a way of increasing student engagement and student learning (Kalb 1984; Hake 1998; McCarthy and Anderson 2000; Knight and Wood 2005). To this end, the team actively sought to use as many cutting-edge techniques as possible in creating lesson plans for the course. The instructors incorporated a flipped classroom model, for instance, which is a method increasingly recognized as a way of actively

engaging students in their own learning (Bergmann and Sams 2012; Hamdan et al. 2013). Students completed reading and lecture modules outside of class and spent class time on activities and exercises that applied that knowledge. In practice, students used their course website to access their materials and prepare for class, while instructors created a variety of activities and exercises to employ during course meetings. Those activities included discussions, simulations, debates, and creating videos—many of which will be detailed in the next section.

The instructors also grounded the course in the principles of experiential learning, hoping to create simulation experiences that the students would not otherwise have. Like the flipped classroom, these techniques increase student engagement and participation and lead to greater student learning (Boud et al. 1993; Chesney and Feinstein 1993; Lantis 1998; Silberman 2007; Gilin and Young 2009; Coffey et al. 2011). In addition to a handful of shorter, classroom-based simulations in the first part of the course, the driving mechanism behind learning was the three-day immersive simulation on poverty, hunger, and human rights at Heifer Ranch's Global Village. The classroom-based simulations helped students engage actively with the material they had received outside of the class, while the three-day trip provided them with simulated experiences related to core issues.

Real World *Survivor* in Action: An Innovative Course to Teach Human Rights

It all started with a cow. Specifically, a heifer—a young, calf-less female cow—that adorned some of the marketing materials for Heifer International, a nonprofit organization that provides animals and the training to families in impoverished areas around the world. A faculty member in the School of Education became interested in the organization and soon discovered that Heifer International had a ranch just eight hours from Webster University's Saint Louis campus, where they ran multi-day educational simulations aimed at teaching students about global hunger and poverty. From there, the idea was born to create an interdisciplinary course that would educate students on these issues and their connections to human rights, bringing them to the Heifer Ranch in order to facilitate first-hand experiences. In addition to the education professor, the instructional team for what became the Real World

Survivor course included two more professors (myself, a political scientist, and a philosopher), a graduate student, and a librarian.

The course consists of three distinct parts aimed at meeting the following learning outcomes. Students will:

- Identify, investigate, and analyze factors that contribute to poverty in the developing world.
- Apply different ethical perspectives to ethical questions related to the developing world.
- Describe a specific problem and identify possible solutions. Articulate ethical implications of action or inaction.
- Demonstrate understanding of how experience outside of the formal classroom relates to the study of alleviating poverty.

Traditional Content, Non-Traditional Approach

The first eight weeks of the RWS course require students to learn about the MDG. Class meets every other week for three hours,[4] with each session covering two of the eight MDGs and one of four skills: quantitative analysis, oral communication, ethical reasoning, and written communication. Prior to each session, instructors post readings, notes, and resources on the course website. In class, students engage in a series of hands-on activities using those materials. In our session on hunger and poverty, for instance, students play an online simulation where they have to make choices trying to lift their simulated family out of poverty. To practice ethical reasoning, they participate in another simulation related to John Rawls' "original position" and then later engage in ethics-driven debates about action on one of the MDGs (see Green 1988). Assignments during the first eight weeks focus on practicing a skill and applying what they learn about the MDGs. For example, students orally pitch a solution to an ethical policy problem, in the form of voicemails left for the instructors. After learning basic skills in data analysis and reading graphs and charts, they produce a quantitative analysis assignment where they assess data on global progress toward completing the goals. And prior to leaving on the trip to Perryville, students prepare a written brief as an advisor to the President of the United States, advocating for policy responses to a particular MDG. While these four basic skills—ethical reasoning, oral communication, quantitative analysis, and written communication—are the focus of the course, activities and assignments also give

students practice in other essential skills such as critical thinking, information literacy, intercultural competence, and teamwork.

Experiencing Hunger and Poverty at Heifer Ranch

After eight weeks of content and skill development related to the MDGs, the students are ready for their simulation experience. They commit to spending three days of their fall break at Heifer Ranch's Global Village. The cost, approximately $350 USD per student, is covered by a lab fee and subsidized by the Dean of the School of Education. Students from a local high school, following their own human rights curriculum, join the university students for this portion of the course.

The experience starts with students' immediate immersion into their new living arrangements. Upon arrival at the Global Village, students first go through "customs," where the instructors and facilitators pose as border agents in order to search their belongings (and their person) and confiscate all phones, snacks, tools, and other banned contraband. Several students are usually taken aside and interrogated—typically in a language they do not speak. The Heifer Ranch facilitators then randomly divide the students into three families from different parts of the world: Guatemala, Zambia, India, Tibet, or U.S. Appalachia. Each family also has a pregnant member who gives birth to a water balloon "baby" on the first night. If the baby "dies" in a watery explosion or does not receive "milk" each day, the family has to sit out of activities and meals for 30 minutes in order to mourn. The five instructors each join one of the families, but are not allowed to assist the students; indeed, the students instead have to assist their instructors, since each one takes on the role of either a toddler or elderly member of the family and has the tendency to wander off if the students do not pay close attention.

The three days in the Global Village consist of a mix of classroom discussions and activities, chores, special meals, and crisis events. In the classroom, students learn about the global distribution of population, food, and wealth—with particular attention paid to the parts of the world students are now assigned to—and discuss strategies for combating inequities and restoring rights. In their homes, which resemble dwellings found in their simulated countries (such as Zambian bomas, Tibetan yurts, or cardboard shacks), they complete chores such as gardening, brick-making, milking goats, and gathering firewood. Every meal is carefully planned, including a hunger banquet that starts the

simulation,[5] a breakfast in which the wealthier families receive luxuries such as butter and sugar, an open market where students use money earned in chores and other activities to purchase food to cook, and an evening meal where some families receive food—and others only pots, matches, and a single potato to feed six people. It is up to the wealthier families to decide whether to trade with (or take pity on) their poorer neighbors. There is never enough food to completely satisfy the hunger of the participants, though—even the wealthy ones.

There are also a few crisis events—some planned, others not—to showcase the precarious nature of life for those living amidst poverty and oppression. A "family" in the Indian slum, for example, suffers a police raid in the middle of the night, and students have to flee or risk being caught and either fined or sent to "prison." During our first simulation experience, that group was so desperate for milk to feed their newborn "baby" that they stole some from another family—whose "child" then died instead. Another "family" neglected to put their firewood under cover at night and a storm soaked the wood, leaving them unable to light a fire and cook any food the next day. And a sudden "flood" washed away the Zambian bomas one year, leaving that group to live on an open hilltop without their belongings, eating only unmarked cans of food that other families donated to support them.

Taken together, time spent in the Global Village provides students with an unforgettable educational experience that reinforces their knowledge of the MDGs, as well as human rights more generally. By spending three days in uncomfortable housing with unreliable food sources, physical chores, ongoing crises, and educational activities that challenge their worldview, they understand in at least a small way what it is like to live in a place where they lack basic government protections and provisions. The first part of the course may help them understand the scope of these problems, but living them, even for three days, helps build empathy for those who experience them daily.

Reflection, Video Production, and Advocacy

Upon returning from the Global Village, students enter the third phase of the course that emphasizes action and advocacy. Following an extensive debrief of their experience, the students are tasked with their final project: working in groups to create five- to eight-minute digital stories advocating for solutions related to the MDG of their choice.

The instructors recruit two video production professors to meet with the students and teach them the basic elements of video production, including training on the necessary software. As for images, the students receive a hard drive that contains hours of footage and photos from their trip. (In keeping with the namesake for the course, the instructors film the entire Global Village experience, including individual reality-show style confessionals from students throughout the three days.) Students mix this footage with other resources uncovered during their research to produce their videos over an eight-week period. They then organize and host a fundraiser at the university on behalf of Heifer International and share their videos with the public, in person as well as online. One year, the Global Village facilitators drove up from Arkansas to attend the presentations and fundraiser, and the students raised enough money ($500 USD) to purchase a heifer for a family.

Impacts of Real World *Survivor*

We are gratified that students report back that this course had a profound effect on their worldviews and caused them to reflect on their own lives. Many declare their intention to engage in further study of issues related to development, human rights, sustainability, ethics, or international relations. Indeed, research data from studies of the Heifer Ranch course in 2013 and 2014 showed that students demonstrated significant progress and achievement related to all of the course learning outcomes.[6]

Learning Outcome #1: Identify, Investigate, and Analyze Factors that Contribute to Poverty in the Developing World

This outcome dominates the first half of the course, where students learn about each MDG and its extent, causes, and potential solutions. Assessment focuses on two assignments: a data analysis in which students identify trends related to each of the MDGs and then answer questions about the potential causes of those trends, as well as a briefing paper that requires them to detail the scope and causes of one global problem represented by the MDGs and offer potential policy solutions. In 2013, the median score on the first assignment (out of 100) was an 84.5, and an 87 on the second. During the post-simulation debriefing, students discussed (without prompting) several of these issues and their causes,

including the role of unequal resource distribution in exacerbating poverty and hunger. Joaquin, for instance, noted that "some countries are limited by conditions not because of their unwillingness to develop," while Jacqueline pointed out that while the distribution of resources matters, the inability to respond to natural disasters and dependence on outside aid often prevent people from focusing on the future.

Learning Outcome #2: Apply Different Ethical Perspectives to Ethical Questions Related to the Developing World

Ethical reasoning is one of the core skills of the course and the students are asked to apply ethical perspectives to the study of human rights and development. They have to consider the ethical nature of the decisions they make in the Heifer Ranch simulation, as well as the kinds of ethical imperatives that motivate action by the international community to achieve the MDGs. Indeed, ethics played a role in student decision-making in the 2013 simulation. For example, as a result of being the last group to enter the hunger banquet, the Zambian family had nothing to eat for lunch and were thus eager for dinner that evening, especially after doing chores—only to discover that their allotment for the meal was a few pots and a box of matches. They insisted, on ethical grounds, that the other groups join them in a single large meal and share their food. This demand—and the reaction of other students who were still hungry themselves—led to an intense discussion the following day over whether a group with more resources faces an ethical imperative to help a group with fewer resources.

In another example, a "family" living in a simulated Indian slum negotiated a trade with the more well-off Guatemalan group that had access to an actual stove: all of their rice, for equal portions of whatever the Guatemalans cooked. After the Guatemalans agreed, the Indians seriously considered double-crossing them and keeping some of the rice for themselves to ensure a supply of food for the next day, even though they had neither pots nor a reliable heat source. As Hector put it, "we quickly turned to less-than-ethical methods to gain things that we needed." Students were able to see first-hand how inequality and hunger influenced their own behavior—particularly since they were in tension with their own friends and classmates. (The Indian group ended up going to talk to the Guatemalans and did, in the end, cook the collective dinner without holding back any of the rice.)

In 2014, a post-course survey asked students to rate their agreement with the statement: "It is our responsibility to do everything possible to prevent people from starving anywhere in the world." On a scale where 1 "does not describe me well" and 5 "describes me very well," the average in this class was a 5, compared to a 4.14 across students in 14 other classes taking courses aimed at increasing global understanding.

Learning Outcome #3: Describe a Specific Problem and Identify Possible Solutions. Articulate Ethical Implications of Action or Inaction

In the final part of the course, students produce videos advocating for action on specific MDGs, using what they learned in the first two parts of the course supplemented by additional research. The final videos in 2013 all demonstrated clear understanding of the scope of one or more MDGs, possible solutions, and the dangers of inaction. One student-produced video, for instance, told the story of "Ted"—a person who represents the billions of people who earns less than $1.25 a day (Anderson 2013). The short video included the extensive citation of figures from the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and other relevant bodies, as well as advocated for a combination of education and community-building as potential solutions to the problems of poverty and hunger. The video quoted one student who notes that the experience at Heifer Ranch "has opened my eyes a lot more…I want to put action to it" (Anderson 2013). Other students in the post-simulation debrief also brought up the role of intentional community development as a solution; Anthony, for example, argued that "we can be more intentional about the ways we build our relationships with others, we can join other groups to build community [and] to move together on a common goal." Another student announced her intention to try doing this locally by creating a community garden in a poorer area of town.

Learning Outcome #4: Demonstrate Understanding of How Experience Outside of the Formal Classroom Relates to the Study of Alleviating Poverty

Initially, several people involved with the course questioned the extent to which a three-day experience could really simulate the impacts of hunger and poverty on peoples' lives. Basiyr Rodney, an education professor

who participated in the simulation beforehand, noted: "I don't know if anyone can really simulate poverty and the feelings that are associated with it, especially knowing that you get to go back to your old life in forty-eight hours. Are we being removed from our bubble long enough to rethink how we live? I'm not sure, but I want to figure that out. Although, a taste of poverty is better than not experiencing it at all" (Webster University School of Education 2012).

Yet the debriefing discussion and subsequent reflection papers made it clear that the experience did have a profound impact on students in 2013. On the trip going to Perryville, students ate their fill at a roadside restaurant without discussing food waste or related issues. After their experience at Heifer Ranch and learning about the rationale behind its no-waste policy, the instructors took the students to an all-you-can-eat buffet on the way home. The impact was immediately apparent; students took very small portions and asked for their peers to help them finish rather than throw food away. Many students reported feeling disgusted about the amount of food available and how much other patrons were wasting—but acknowledged that just a few days before, that would have been their behavior. They also feared that in a couple of months, they would go back to that way of living. Other students expressed guilt in the debriefing session that the simulation was so short. As Nora put it, she felt "filled with guilt that I get to walk away and go back to things that one billion people can't even experience." Other students discussed how the simulation showed them the value of communication and working as a community to achieve shared goals. All of them acknowledged the privileges they enjoyed by not regularly experiencing the hunger, poverty, and oppression they faced in the Global Village. Many of these students have since gone on to pursue further education and/or careers in human rights, international development, and sustainability.

Challenges and Conclusions

The Real World *Survivor* course represents a unique opportunity for educating students in human rights by combining academic training with simulated real-world experience. While it has made progress on achieving its learning outcomes, it is not without its challenges. First, a course like this requires a team of faculty to pull off—but the team's different perspectives on planning and teaching can create serious friction. The RWS instructors at Webster have radically different teaching styles, and

finding a middle ground in how to approach the course sometimes creates conflict. This is exacerbated by the extensive amount of planning, logistics, and administrative work required by a class like this. Second, the course eventually became a victim of its own success. Initially pitched as a potential pilot for the Keystone Seminar in the general education program, the course and its unique features—innovative pedagogy, integration of content and skills, and an experiential component—became the model for other seminars in the program. Those seminars entail a lower per-student cost and do not require students to give up part of their fall break—and therefore recruiting students for RWS has become a real challenge. A final issue is that the course content, as is the case with much of HRE, became quickly outdated when the MDGs expired in 2015. Much of the course had to be re-done to fit their SDG replacements.

Despite these challenges, the course is clearly still worth offering due to its impact on students. Joaquin experienced a profound change in his worldview as a result of this experience. He commented years later that the course "changed my perspective on many issues." He went on to earn an MA in international relations and to teach at a community college so that he could educate students about these issues himself. Another student underwent a similar transformation. When it came time to choose a member of each family to be "pregnant," Hector swiftly volunteered. For the next few hours, he hammed it up, harnessing a pillow and blanket to represent his growing belly and demanding that a fellow male student, who he designated the father, rub his feet. The birth scene he staged that night had the rest of the family laughing hysterically. Once he birthed the water-balloon "baby," he became a protective mama. But by the end of the second day, the fun had started to wear off and the reality of caring for the water balloon and preventing it from breaking started to sink in. He organized the entire family to care for the "child" and later reported his new understanding of how overwhelming it must be for new mothers to take care of their children if they lack community support, are unable to take time off of work, and/or live in conflict zones. Hector went on to pursue a master's degree in international conflict and development. Danielle was also fundamentally changed. She noted, "I think having so many material items and technologies has created a distance in the relationships I form with people. This is applicable to everyone in already developed countries. This experience has made me realize that while living in poverty is hard, there are still some

advantages…. I want to become part of something bigger and make a larger difference." Finally, Adam summed up exactly why a course like this can be so effective:

> A week and a few days have elapsed since the end of the trip, and I have undergone changes in attitude toward the experience since the time that we arrived at Heifer Ranch. I reflect now upon that evolution, and I expect that the effect of this experiential learning on me will continue for some time… I cannot say that these few days spent in a simulation of impoverished villages in rural Arkansas totally enlightened me to all manner of worldly struggles, but I can say that the experience brought me to some realizations that would not be met by simply reading on the subject.

Creating and maintaining a course like this is a labor of love. It requires much more commitment than a traditional class on human rights and sustainable development ever would, given its use of non-traditional pedagogies, the logistics and planning involved in an interactive simulation, and a final project focused on video production. Yet I believe it is worth the effort because of its profound and lasting effect on students, changing their understanding of and appreciation for human rights norms.

Notes

1. All names and identifying details have been changed to protect students' privacy.
2. The program consists of a First Year Seminar, eight courses grounded in one of five content areas (Social Systems and Human Behavior, Roots of Culture, Physical and Natural World, Global Understanding, and Quantitative Literacy) and five skills (oral communication, written communication, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and intercultural competence), and a Keystone Seminar capstone.
3. Following the creation of the GCP, the original cross-listing system was ended and RWS received the official code of "KEYS 4001," marking it as the original Keystone Seminar.
4. The course vastly exceeds its required content hours thanks to the multi-day simulation, so it is not necessary to meet every week.
5. A "hunger banquet" is a meal where there is enough food for everyone but it is distributed unequally, typically according to wealth or consumption proportions found in the world (Krain and Shadle 2006). Guests representing the United States, for example, receive the lion's share of food, while those representing poorer countries such as Somalia receive

perhaps a single spoonful of rice. On our first trip to the Global Village, students accessed a sandwich station in the order of the wealth of their families. The first group presumably assumed that the food on the table would be restocked; it was not. By the time the last group entered, only a couple of slices of bread and a little meat remained, while the chips, cookies, fruit, and ice tea had run out. It became clear that there would not be enough for everyone to satiate their hunger. The question then became whether or not the early students, already well into eating their meal, would share with their peers; surprisingly, very few did.

6. Students in the 2013 class consented to being observed, interviewed, and recorded during the trip to Heifer Ranch and to have their coursework scrutinized. Students in the 2014 course took surveys before and after the trip assessing their attitudes and beliefs on a variety of international issues to measure the concept of "global understanding," a key area of the university's general education program. These findings are based on the field notes, interviews, and assignments completed by 12 students in the 2013 course and 8 students in the 2014 course. Students in 14 other classes completed surveys in 2014 (totaling 141 students), although none participated in the Heifer trip or another short-term experiential learning course.

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