Global Water Brigades

Focused Research Report

Prepared for and Submitted to the
Initiative for Sustainability and Energy
at Northwestern University

April 1, 2011
Project Goals and Visions

Global Brigades is the largest student-led global health and sustainable development organization in the world. The mission of Northwestern University’s Global Water Brigades (GWB) chapter is to empower young volunteers to create sustainable solutions to water access and sanitation issues in under-resourced communities. The goals of each water project combine a focus on sustainability, development, and health in bringing water to a community without access to clean and safe water. GWB helps students understand the importance of sustainable energy in resource-constrained environments through first-hand experience in developing countries.

Overview of Situation in Honduras and Global Water Brigades’ Role

Worldwide, over one billion people do not have access to safe and clean water. As one of the poorest countries in Central America, Honduras is in need of sustainable water solutions. In Honduras, 53% of the population lives below the poverty line, and the average family survives on 3 to 5 gallons of water per day. Access to clean drinking water is a preventative health measure because over 80% of the world’s illnesses are associated with contaminated drinking water. However, low-income families in Honduras are often unaware of the health issues that stem from the use of unsanitary drinking water. For the past six years, Global Brigades has benefitted 315,000 people in Honduras and Panama, and GWB benefitted over 2,000 people in 5 Honduran communities in 2010. Northwestern students on the brigade work alongside GWB in-country staff and community leaders to bring new or improved water solutions to these communities with limited or no access to clean water.

Overview of March 2011 Brigade

Northwestern’s chapter of GWB sent 10 students on the March 2011 brigade. This group of students included students from each graduating class and from majors such as Industrial
Engineering, Biology, Social Policy, and Learning and Organizational Change. The group worked in Honduras from March 19 to March 25, 2011 and travelled to the community of El Cantón daily. El Cantón is a community of 75 homes and 450 people. Its government-sponsored water system was built in 1992, but it was never completed and even two decades years later it does not reach parts of the community. The Northwestern brigade helped to rebuild and extend this system. Additionally, the 10 brigaders led an educational water program for the children in the community.

**Project Development and Implementation**

In assessing a community with limited or no access to clean water, GWB in-country staff and community leaders identify problems and propose realistic solutions to the current water system. Brigaders help implement these solutions while working alongside community members and local engineers. Such community involvement helps promote commitment to the project in a larger context. On the March 2011 brigade, the 10 Northwestern students contributed work to the ongoing project in El Cantón. This work consisted of digging trenches, connecting pipes, and covering the pipes by filling in the trenches. Dozens of El Cantón’s residents worked on the project simultaneously, completing over 300 meters of the project during the week.

**Educational Program**

In addition to the physical work, the brigade prepared 4 lessons on sanitation and hygiene and presented these lessons to approximately 50 students in 2 schools. These lessons involved an informational lecture for each section as well as an activity and a game. The students, who were between ages 5 and 12, learned about caring for latrines, appropriate hand-washing techniques, and the transmission of microbes via contaminated water.
Evaluation

Northwestern GWB’s March 2011 brigade allowed the group of 10 student to not only help with the physical construction of the water project but to also gain an understanding of the components of health, sustainability, and development it involves. The combination of experience in engineering, international non-profit work, community development, and public health infrastructure will enhance the academic focuses of the students who participated. The spring break brigade is one means by which students at Northwestern are able to engage themselves in a global cause, applying real-world use of their Northwestern education.