

The CO-OP Project
«GreetingLine» and James Allison

BACKGROUND

In the rolling hills near the border between Rwanda and Uganda lies a school so remarkable that it could change the world. Children of Uganda, CofU, is both a school and an orphanage for children who lost their parents to AIDS. Some of the children presumably are HIV+ and some not. To a visitor it is impossible to tell who holds which status. All receive an extraordinary level of family-style care and nurturing, and an impressive level of education. The education is so remarkable and rare that comparatively well-off neighbors are anxious to send their kids to CofU - for a fee and despite the stigma of being associated with HIV/AIDS children.

Uganda is a country nestled in eastern Africa that is still combating many challenges, including AIDS and the repercussions that accompany it. According to the World Bank, Uganda has 1.7 million AIDS-related orphans, the most of any country in the world. Yet Uganda has had one of the most successful AIDS campaigns, instigating a publicity campaign to reduce stigma and increase knowledge about transmission and condoms, and becoming the first and one of the only developing country to have a declining prevalence of HIV.

There is a reciprocal relationship between development and peace—they require and sustain each other. A prerequisite for both is education. It was a lesson that was engrained in me from a young age: education lessens poverty, improves health, and advances understanding. The close link between peace, including humane treatment and social mobility, and education seems to resurface in different contexts and cultures. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian education theorist, argued that marginalized groups are kept subservient and impoverished through perpetuating a cycle of ignorance and limiting access to resources. Oppressed people who also have no way out of their circumstance often turn violent. This is highlighted in the connection between female education and diminished physical abuse, improved health, and greater rights for women. Education is particularly crucial in Uganda, where the World Health Organization reports that 46% of Uganda women are physically abused.

Spending much of her gap year between high school and college living in Uganda, Gabrielle saw both a need and a desire for an educational system that could lead to more opportunities for individuals and for society. While she worked for Hospice Uganda caring for dying AIDS patients, she made a connection with Able Mzebembe, the Ugandan administrator of CofU. He was eager to see the students have the opportunity to pursue higher education, especially in the United States. Abel's enthusiasm, as well as the student's eagerness, combined with our excitement, interest, and devotion will form a vibrant and lasting program. Our commitment to this endeavor's success is highlighted by James' pass devotion to formal and informal tutoring as well as his previous mentoring work in rural Belize. Similarly, Gabrielle's knowledge of the Ugandan culture and her completion of AIDS research, resulting in receiving Yale's Medalie Research Grant as well as two published articles and a book whose rights were bought by the lobbying group AJWS, testify to our past success and vouch for our steadfast commitment.

PROJECT PROPOSAL

These seemingly disparate ideas and realities – the school for AIDS orphans, the Ugandan history of successful efforts to combat tragic challenges, the connection between education, development, and peace - coincide and coalesce to form the foundation for this project: College Opportunities for Orphans with Potential (CO-OP). The CO-OP Project will create opportunities for the orphans to apply and attend colleges in the United States. The CO-OP Project will accomplish its goal through 5 steps. We propose to:

- 1) Bring books, textbooks, and computers with Internet links for on-line courses. Books, such as great novels, poetry, history books, and current high school textbooks are desperately needed to enhance classroom learning in African schools. In addition, many teachers lack suitable training in particular subjects, so making on-line courses available can help to train both teachers and students in these areas.
- 2) Bring training materials and conduct test preparation course at CofU for standardized college admission tests such as SAT and ACT. African students have no experience in these standardized tests. As test preparation courses in the U.S. prove, preparation in test-taking skills, such as knowing how to analyze questions and eliminate answers, can significantly increase scores. Over the past four years, James has worked with Advantage tutoring programs—acquiring the skills necessary to tutor at CofU.

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- 3) Conduct training for students and current teachers in the U.S. college application process including how to writing college essays, how to write recommendations, how to prepare resumes, how to gather a student's activities lists, etc. Since African students and their teachers have little experience with the types of essays and recommendations required by American colleges, training them to prepare appropriate applications will facilitate consideration of their application. In terms of specific training techniques, we hope to work in small groups of students outside of their regular class hours. Based on past training and experience, James will work with the students in mathematics and grammar while Gabrielle will focus on essay writing. In high school, James worked as a math tutor and similarly Gabrielle was hired by her school as a writing tutor. Gabrielle has also written for both The Chicago Tribune and Reuters News Agency.
- 4) Link CofU with the U.S. Embassy education office. This office both facilitates applications and is the only location in Uganda that administers the standardized college admission tests. Currently, only the Ugandan elite access this office. In 2006, Gabrielle ran two workshops on college admissions essays for Connie Mutazindwa, who heads this office. We will seek to work with her to facilitate the link between CofU and the Embassy staff.
- 5) Contact U.S. college admissions' offices to collect information about their needs and to inform them about CofU and applying students. We have previously contacted admissions offices for Yale and Dartmouth, both of which are committed to admitting more east African students. Additionally, we are committed to establishing ties with a broader range of American colleges and universities.

IMPACT AND SIGNIFICANCE

Unlike many interventions, education has a reverberating and lasting impact. It changes a person and their environment. The CofU students, with their solid educational foundations and first-hand knowledge of adversities, deserve leadership positions that allow them to make the changes to their society that they know are necessary. Higher education, ideally in the United States, can elevate them into powerful leadership positions. By enhancing the education of AIDS orphans and making admission to U.S. colleges accessible to them, the CO-OP Project can help bring peace to part of east Africa and serve as a model.

The CO-OP Project can affect Ugandan society in 4 ways. First, it can create a pool of skilled and highly trained people to work in the country. Indeed, even those students who do not ultimately enroll in a U.S. college will have learned valuable skills for working in a global economy, including completing applications and understanding American expectations for writing. Second, students can serve as role models for future students. Upon returning to Uganda they can help others navigate the college application process and the experience of living in a foreign country. Third, the CO-OP Project will enhance the students' understanding of developed countries for an era of globalization. The students will have gained a valuable international perspective on their own country. This will be important for African development, especially the effort to have African countries join the international order. But most importantly, with education at elite US colleges, these students will be positioned to become leaders in Uganda. Education in the United States will cultivate and allow the international understanding, experience of democracy and diversity, as well as social connections that are necessary for effective leadership in the global world. We cannot dictate what they will do with their leadership potential, but the students at CofU have the direct experience that is so important in addressing the myriad of problems they experienced first hand growing up—HIV/AIDS, poverty, stigma, family losses and stresses, lack of health care services, and poor infrastructure.

This project will be sustainable and lasting. The books and Internet courses will serve many students, year after year. Similarly, the trained teachers, the connection between the U.S. Embassy and CofU, and the connection with American colleges can last for generations to come. Additionally, the returning graduates will be able to spur more applicants and become influential in the government, economy, and country affecting many and changing much.

These children who have fought against odds to survive and to achieve will know what changes need to be made. Their heart will be with the children they grew up among and the poverty-stricken region they come from, leading them to make positive changes in the governing of the country. I recall speaking with Ugandan children, hearing their lofty dreams and knowing that they had no avenues to pursue them; this propels me forward. Not only do they, but we all, need their dreams to become attainable.