

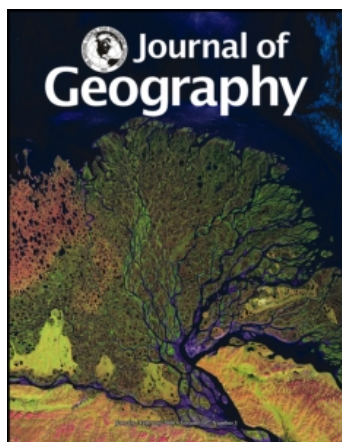
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Student Learning in Guatemala: An Untenured Faculty Perspective on International Service Learning and Public Good

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Student Learning in Guatemala: An Untenured Faculty Perspective on International Service Learning and Public Good

Matthew J. Taylor

ABSTRACT

In this article I explain how I combined service learning, public-good work, and research in Guatemala. This path has not been easy. Indeed, it has been risky because the time invested in public-good work and teaching field classes could have detracted from research productivity. Taking a risk under the current and traditional academic model at many universities, however, has resulted in the creation of a service-learning class in Guatemala where students learn to conduct community-based research and then, along with the community, formulate a plan of action to try and meet needs identified by the community. I offer a cautionary note for untenured faculty because my tenure case rests on my store of traditional publications, not on the public-good work and service-learning classes that I teach abroad.

Key Words: *service learning, public scholarship, Guatemala*

INTRODUCTION

Since 1990 I have had the privilege of getting to know Guatemala and Guatemalans. I spend months on end living in towns in eastern Guatemala, villages in the western highlands and return refugee communities in the northern lowlands. My research focuses on how community social capital was created and destroyed by civil war, and how this, in turn, influences natural resource management and the environment. Defending this research before academics is easy. Justifying my research to residents of war-torn communities in rural Guatemala, however, was not easy. They, understandably, wanted to know how they would benefit from my presence in their community and my research on "them." It took many hours of debate before community members saw *some* benefits to my studies. They were cautious because the rewards I offered were not tangible. I offered many "maybe" statements like "maybe you can use the results of my study to write petitions to governmental and nongovernmental agencies for aid." They replied, ever so politely, "Matthew, what we need is potable water, schools, roads, and electricity." The harrowing contrast between my wants and their needs struck me hard.

It is only now, more than five years later, that I am able to give back and satisfy the needs of some rural Guatemalan communities by involving students in service-learning projects. It has not been easy to use my position at a university in the "north" to benefit those who I work with in Guatemala. In this article I provide the details of the separate paths I have taken to become a public-good scholar who, hopefully, can satisfy the traditional demands of academia and also some of the tangible needs of the people with whom I have been fortunate enough to share portions of their dignified lives. This dual path has been risky because I had no assurance that the effort put into public-good work and teaching classes abroad would bring rewards in terms of publications and tenure at my university. This path was also risky in that I was not trained to perform public-good research; rather, like most academics, I was trained to be an objective observer and write traditional research papers in scholarly journals.

First, I provide an abridged history of Guatemala and Ixcán, where much of my work is based. This brief history will illustrate the imperative to involve students in service-learning projects. I then describe my ongoing public-good work, which has resulted in several publications that *may* some day have an impact on government policy and local livelihoods. I then explain the process I followed to change the nature and trajectory of my academic career and orient as many classes as possible around public-good and service learning. Moreover, I explain how this type of work with communities and students at the University of Denver (DU) results in tangible changes in the living conditions of Guatemala's refugees. I end on a cautionary note because, ultimately, the tenure case rests on a store of traditional publications, not on the service-learning classes that I have created to serve both university students and Guatemalans.

AN ABRIDGED READING OF GUATEMALA'S RECENT HISTORY

Guatemalans endured more than forty years of civil war from 1954 to 1996. This conflict began when the United States sponsored a coup that overthrew the populist government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. Arbenz and Juan José Arévalo (1944–1951), his like-minded predecessor, enacted several "radical" reforms, such as a social security system, more equitable labor laws, and most importantly, land reform. Unused land from large properties would be eligible for purchase

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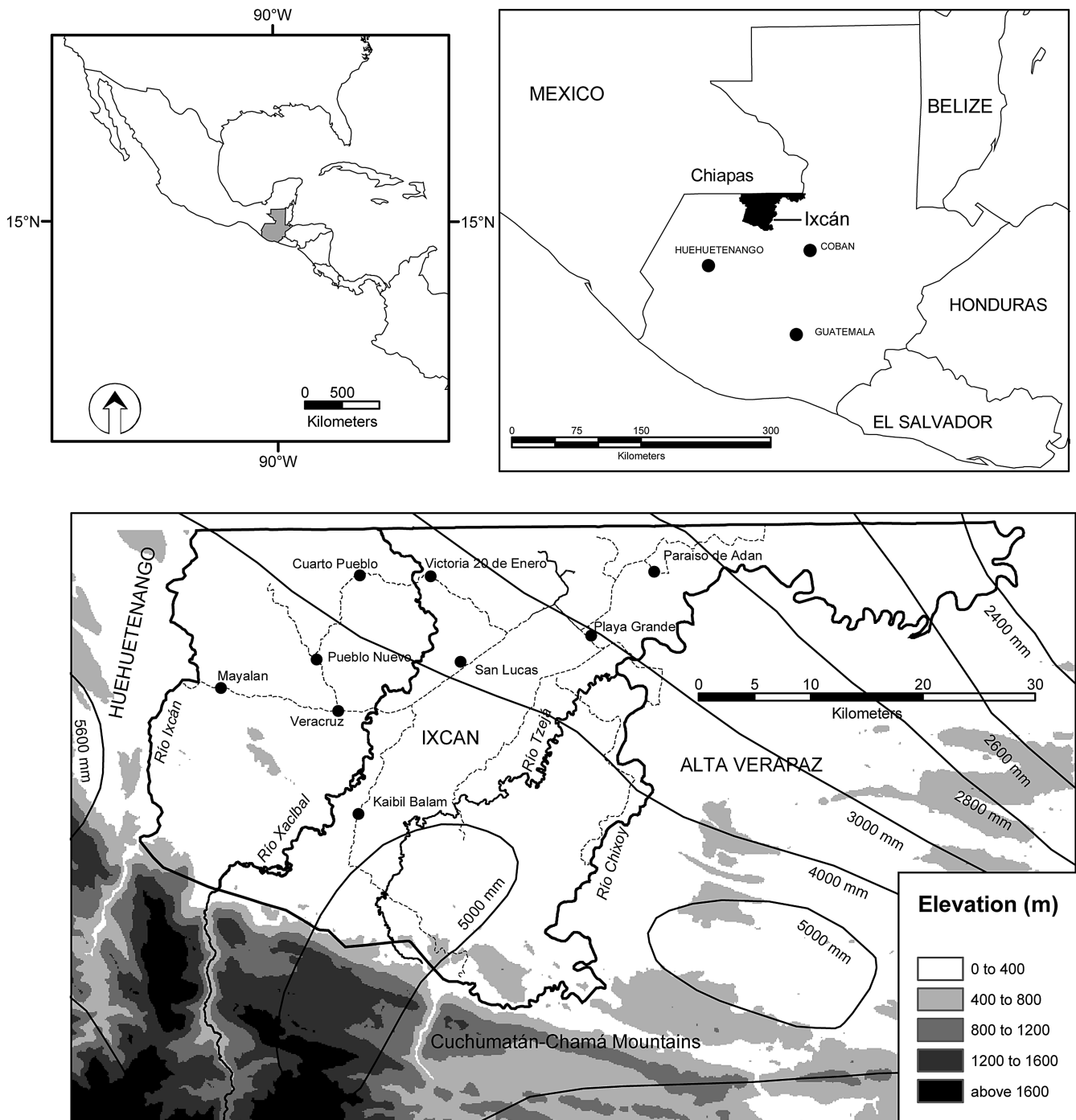


Figure 1. Location of Guatemala and Ixcán.

by the government and redistribution to Guatemala's landless majority. The consequences of this "ten years of spring" upset not only national landowners, but also the United Fruit Company (UFC), the country's largest land-holder (Schlesinger and Kinzer 1999). Under pressure, the CIA-orchestrated 1954 coup replaced reform and democracy in Guatemala with overt and covert military dictatorships, concentrating power (as in the past) in the hands of an

elite minority. However, distinct from nineteenth century repressions, the 1950s soon produced a resistance, and Guatemala plunged into a devastating civil war that lasted for the next four decades.

Much of my research, teaching, and service take place in the municipality of Ixcán, in the Department of Quiché (Fig. 1), where the civil war had its most horrendous consequences. The municipality was sparsely settled when

the civil war began but settlement schemes and spontaneous migrants changed all that by the 1980s when violence peaked in the region. In the first phase, Catholic church-sponsored cooperatives of Ixcán directly contrasted with the traditional model of life in rural Guatemala in which poor farmers lived in the economic and social shadows of the state and operated on the margins of the national economy. In contrast, cooperatives in Ixcán established something unheard of in Guatemala's countryside—genuine socioeconomic development for Guatemala's poor (Taylor 2007).

The second phase of settlement occurred in the 1970s when landless Guatemalans from all regions of the country moved to Ixcán when they heard about available land (Garst 1993). These spontaneously-settled communities differed from the church-organized cooperatives in that settlers came alone and often lived and worked in isolation on their designated parcels. Yet a third type of settlement took place in the early 1980s. At the height of the government's scorched-earth campaign in Ixcán in 1981 and 1982, Guatemala's National Institute for Agrarian Reform, with funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), sponsored new settlements in the northeastern areas of Ixcán (CEIDEC 1990; Dennis, Elbow, and Heller 1984). The ethnically diverse settlers of this scheme received no prior training or advice about settling in a strange environment. Moreover, because they arrived in the midst of massacres, the army restricted their movements.

Beatriz Manz (1988, 127) succinctly describes the relation of the settlement history of Ixcán to Guatemala's civil war in her book *Refugees of a Hidden War*:

In the 1970s thousands of highland Indians successfully colonized the Ixcán, an impenetrable, isolated, and unpopulated rain forest. During this period, the area became the stronghold of the largest guerrilla organization, the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP [Guerrilla Army of the Poor]). The military conflict between the army and the guerrillas escalated, leading to a fierce counterinsurgency campaign in which entire communities were massacred, most villages were abandoned or destroyed, and thousands fled. Ixcán today [mid to late 1980s] is a development pole. The military tightly controls villages, while the EGP remains in the outlying areas. Armed clashes occur regularly. There are also thousands of villagers living in the jungle beyond military control.

Reacting to the presence of insurgents in Ixcán, the Guatemalan military deliberately targeted any form of organization for destruction. They eliminated priests, community catechists, cooperative leaders, teachers, and health workers. Finally, the military lashed out at the whole popu-

lation with massacres, as well as forcing survivors to police themselves by creating forced civil self-defense patrols. The scorched earth campaign of 1981 and 1982 forced tens of thousands of Ixcán's surviving settlers to abandon their prized parcels and seek refuge in Chiapas, Mexico (Falla 1992). Other residents refused to abandon Guatemala and survived in the dense forests of northwestern Ixcán. Finally, some settlers stayed in their communities hoping to endure military rule. Many of these settlers were forced into model villages.

This era of violence lasted until 1996 when peace accords were signed. Fifty years of violence resulted in over 200,000 deaths and millions of internal and international refugees (Taylor and Steinberg 2006). Also, this prolonged attempt at revolution did nothing to change the situation of Guatemala's majority. Most Guatemalans (the population is 60% rural) continue to struggle to eke out a living on below-subsistence-sized plots of land. On the other hand, two to three percent of the ruling elite own 65 percent of Guatemala's arable land (World Bank 2004). It is to a country unchanged, indeed, a country that counts more poverty and subdivision of land for the poor than fifty years ago, that refugees and ex-combatants return to civil life.

In sum, this period of "unrest," arguably one of the most turbulent and bloody conflict in recent Latin American history, led to a complete unraveling of civil society. Today, four-fifths of Ixcán residents live in poverty and more than 95 percent lack basic services like potable water, drainage, and electricity (Taylor 2005).

It is in this environment that I have conducted research with community members and students from the University of Denver. Working in this environment is not easy. Developing relationships with community members who have lived in fear for their entire lives is a slow process that takes years, even decades.

TIME COMMITMENTS RELATED TO TEACHING SERVICE-LEARNING CLASSES ABROAD

Escaping the legacy of violence in Guatemala is impossible. Any serious scholar of Guatemala, where violence permeates every facet of daily life, is driven to make changes at multiple levels. Ignoring the poverty and pain would indeed take a callous and ignorant researcher. Below I relate how I have dealt with this *need* to enact change on two levels. The first level is at the purely academic level, which may result in traditional academic knowledge (i.e., scholarly publications) about Guatemala's situation. The second level takes that accumulated knowledge to enact change and pass on the knowledge to others (i.e., students) on how to enact change.

Building the Bases for Productive Public-Good Work

My research strives to understand how people in the developing world can better their livelihoods through improved use of resources, focusing specifically on the role

of social capital in resource use among settlers along a forested frontier in the Ixcán region of Guatemala. This question cannot be answered from an office or a brief visit to the field. Instead, I eased myself slowly into a region that endured ruthless massacres over the last forty years. Multiple visits over eighteen years, totaling thirty-four months of in-situ time, permit an initial understanding of the lives of Guatemalans.

This slow accumulation of trust, establishing friendships in another part of the world, and the collection of data for academic purposes, has resulted in several scholarly publications. However, although these publications served an academic purpose, they did little to directly improve the lives of those people I write about. These publications, though, do have public-good intentions and simply serve a different audience. For example, in a critique of Guatemala's rural electrification program, I argued that the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on extending transmission lines to remote households could be better spent on needs identified by local populations, like potable water and reforestation programs (Taylor 2005). Although this paper was disseminated widely to Guatemalan government officials and nongovernmental organizations, there is no proof that the research resulted in tangible benefits for Guatemalans. Likewise, my work on the impacts of remittances on the environment in Guatemala, while important in improving our understanding of deforestation dynamics in Latin America, does little to help struggling cattle owners and cardamom growers (Taylor, Moran-Taylor, and Rodman-Ruiz 2006).

Working closely with Mike Steinberg, I published several papers on how Guatemalans memorialize the violence of the civil war (Steinberg and Taylor 2004; Taylor and Steinberg 2006). These papers, however, still fall short of helping the people who we write about. We acknowledge that fact in those papers and criticize the academic venture in which our lives and careers are made upon the death and suffering of others. We also state that all the academic debates about violence in Guatemala do little to help those impacted in part because, quite simply, a large percentage of Guatemalans are still illiterate.

In yet another project that revolves around Guatemala's civil war, I bring to light the words of Octavio, a Guatemalan gentleman who served in Guatemala's civil patrols (*Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil*, or PAC) in the 1980s and 1990s. During the civil war hundreds of thousands of men were forced by the military to serve in civil self-defense patrols. This onerous service entailed becoming the eyes and ears of the military. Moreover, civil patrollers were often forced to search for and ambush insurgents, putting their lives on the line for a state that saw them as cannon fodder. Octavio told his story of life in Ixcán because he wanted the words to reach the eyes and hearts of many people (Fig. 2). He served in the PAC for at least ten years, lost a brother and a child to the conflict, spent time in a hole on a nearby military base in Ixcán, resisted the mind control of the military, and today serves his community in many ways. Octavio



Figure 2. Don Octavio tells of his years of required service in the civil defense patrols. He sits in the middle of a cornfield we planted several months previously. This is the only place he felt comfortable telling this story. San Lucas, Ixcán, Guatemala; August 2002.

wants his story to be told and my position and access to publishers served to tell his story. This too, then, is public good.

My traditional research in Guatemala serves the public good, but it does not go far enough. Academics often owe their careers to the people they study. But how do we give back in a very tangible way to the people and places we study? We may publish in academic journals, but often our work is not widely read nor acted upon. Do our publications improve or change the lives of those who deserve more? My drive to understand, like that of many others around the world, comes from an ethical and political ideal and desire to improve the circumstances that make life possible (Peet and Hartwick 1999, 11). Such aspirations are not easy. It is much easier, in terms of tenure, to reject public-good projects, teaching students in the field, and deviations from traditional academic models. This approach, however, would entail much mental anguish on the behalf of altruistic souls. Action, then, must result. If we do decide to act, we must:

1. Ask how to take action given the constraints of traditional academic structures;
2. Question how we can begin to transform that structure, or operate wisely within our given bounds to ensure that we get tenure; and
3. Then, with tenure, go on to investigate—with security—the way to transform academia to serve a larger public.

Some universities (University of Pittsburgh and Michigan State University), according to Brustein, have

taken bold steps in this direction by rethinking the requirements for promotion and tenure. Simply, they recognize and value faculty who make the effort to internationalize research and teaching. These institutions do this by “appealing to their [faculty] self-interests” (Brustein 2007, 387), which means that administrations recognize that many faculty have years of international experience and allow faculty and students to work together in the country where they have expertise.

Using Academic Experience for Service Learning and Public Good

I am fortunate to work at a university that supports my efforts for tangible action that serves the needs of the people with whom I work. This public-good work and the involvement of students in that work, though, would not have been possible without academic publications and research experience, which have placed me in position within the university and my discipline to request funds and personnel (students, in my case) to do more applied work in Guatemala. For example, during my second year at DU, I received funds from the university’s Public Good Fund to build on results of community-based research and provide Ixcán communities with water filters. I was fortunate to find three Spanish-speaking students to travel to remote areas of Guatemala in the summer of 2005. When asked by the university to describe the impact of the provision of potable water to 158 households in San Lucas, Ixcán, I replied at the time, “well, we have provided the residents of San Lucas with potable water for a year.” Moreover, I had no idea as to how this project would be sustainable. The initial project and “empujon” (push) resulted in many unforeseen benefits to Guatemalan residents and DU students. I now perceive the first three students as pioneers of an idea and project that has resulted in many more DU students learning about community-based research and Guatemala’s past and present.

In the second year of the project, the community members, students, and I realized that we needed to find a way to provide water during drier times of the year and to find a more sustainable way to make water potable (the clay filters only lasted one year). Once again, with funds from DU, students and I returned to Guatemala to install large water tanks to collect rainwater from the roof of the school and health clinic (Fig. 3). We also held a workshop to show residents how to build biosand filters, which can provide years of service with minimal maintenance (Fig. 4).

These projects were successful. Using health clinic records we have documented a decline in diarrhea among children in the community. Moreover, the biosand filter technology is spreading. A women’s group in San Lucas has started a small workshop where they make the filters and then sell them at a small profit to neighbors. This project, then, has given the power to local residents. They no longer need to rely on outside capital to provide drinking water to their families.



Figure 3. We installed rainwater catchment tanks to ensure a steady water supply to the school and health clinic during the dry season. San Lucas, Ixcán, Guatemala; June 2005.

The potable water work progressed when another group of students expressed their interest in working on potable water issues around the world. We decided on two courses of action. One produced immediate tangible results and the other, while not as tangible to the students and community involved, has the potential for long-term benefit. First, we held another biosand filter workshop where we taught teachers and children how to purify water using clear plastic soda bottles and sunlight (ultraviolet light purification of water). The second project involved capturing water from the clouds high in Guatemala’s Cuchumatán Mountains (Fig. 5). Residents here experience severe water shortages, especially during the months of March and April, as the dry season draws to a close. During these months, however, fog often surrounds local hilltops and communities. We wanted to build fog collectors to harvest the water in the sky. Before doing this, we decided to install data loggers to record relative humidity (100% indicates either fog or rain) in an attempt to find the best location to build fog collectors. We had to involve community members in this



Figure 4. University of Denver student Garred Moltz shows participants at the biosand filter workshop how the filter works. San Lucas, Ixcán, Guatemala; March 2007.

process. In this case, students saw how one must work *with* a community to slowly arrive at sustainable solutions. Moreover, community collaboration on this project is vital because household members recorded their observations of the weather, which helped to distinguish rain from fog when we download the data logger with readings of 100 percent relative humidity (Fig. 6). After comparing results with the observations of the community members, we determined that the site receives enough fog during the dry season to warrant the installation of a standard fog collector (SFC). DU students and community members installed an SFC. The collection area of the SFC is one square meter, which will permit a family to collect fog during the upcoming dry season and measure the amount collected in a bucket. Students will then work with community members to determine the size of the full-size fog collector that we will need to construct. This calculation will be based on the amount of water collected by the SFC and the water needs of the community during the dry season.

While the projects were successful and continue to produce unanticipated results, they took immense amounts of time, which (at least until 2007) did not allow for

publications of the type required for tenure. Time is spent not only in the field, but in preparing for fieldwork, readying students for Guatemala, investigating technology, building test filters at the university, and visiting by phone with community partners in Guatemala. The conflict over time was partly because my public-good work and service-learning classes, although built on traditional academic bases, ran parallel to academic work. Part of this internal conflict arose because I was not integrating public-good work and service learning into my classes. I have now overcome this problem. However, the next step in the process requires identifying how to combine publishing expectations with public-good and service learning.

The rewards of combining public-good projects with service-learning projects have been immense. However, how do we measure the experiences of students who have been involved in the projects? How do we place career changes for students after their experiences in Guatemala in terms of “learning outcomes” on university course evaluations? For example, several students have asked for advice on how to change their career paths so that they can serve the common good. Those students now work in Guatemala and Nicaragua. Likewise, we cannot put a price on a child’s lack of suffering and indeed their life (deaths from diarrhea are common). The support and confidence that DU placed in me has resulted in a whole new outlook. These experiences (and funds) have allowed me to pursue a new type of scholarship and create a new generation of undergraduate students who are versed in how to do community-based research. Although the intent of DU and the Public Good Fund is not necessarily to transform the faculty involved into new types of scholars, it is taking place in my case. However, the path to change is not easy and it is not quick.

Directions for Student Involvement, Teaching, and Research while Doing Public Good

In my case, the process of integrating public good into teaching and research began slowly with the prompting and support of DU’s Center for Civic Engagement and Service Learning. I realized that I could teach service-learning classes in the field. However, over the past four years (2005–2008) I have involved students only in the action end of the public-good work. In other words, they have not completed any of the community-based research that allows them to identify the needs of the community. I am aware, unfortunately, that it may well be impossible for one class of students to see a project through from beginning to end, because forming community contacts, doing research with the community, deciding on a course of action, applying for and receiving funds, and implementing a project is well out of the scope of a quarter or semester project. I do envision, though, teaching students about how to do community-based research, how to slowly insert themselves into a community, and involving them in one part of a project (Strand *et al.* 2003). For example, during the fall quarter of 2007 students and I traveled to Guatemala. After the

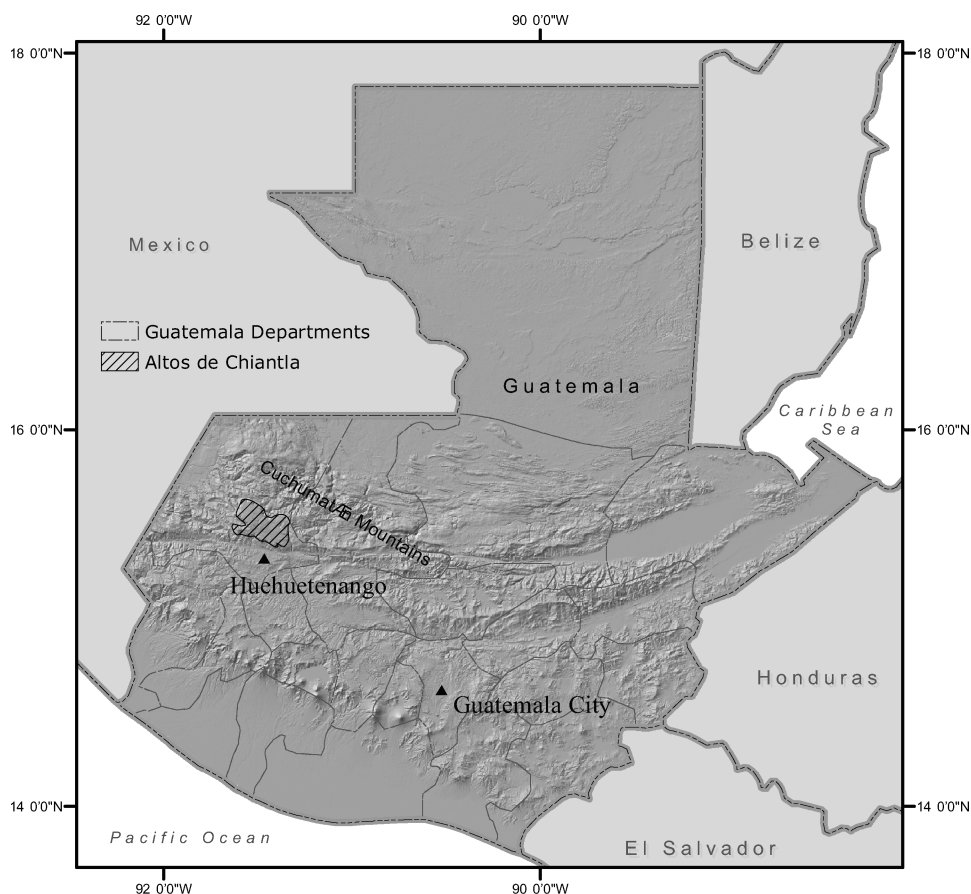


Figure 5. Location of the Cuchumatán Mountains and the Altos de Chiantla. Here University of Denver students have worked with community members for several years to find the best location to build fog collectors.

students acquired a solid background on Guatemala and the rural realities, and after beginning to understand the principles of community-based research, we traveled to highland communities to download the data loggers that other DU students installed earlier that year. Students also made appropriate local contacts that allowed us to install more data loggers to collect additional information. Students the following year constructed a standard fog collector based on the work and recommendations of the 2007 class (Fig. 7). In this way, students came to realize that doing good public work and service learning is a slow process that requires much time and effort.

Although I have succeeded in involving students and teaching into public-good projects, I still lack a good path on how to integrate public-good work with publications. I know that I can do public-good research, collect data, and involve students. But where do I publish this work? This will take some sustained research and learning of a new literature. What do I write about? For whom do I write? What is the style? What are the journals? Who do I read? This is all a new dissertation, indeed,



Figure 6. University of Denver students and the Calmo family of Chemal, Huehuetenango, get ready to install a data logger. March 2007.



Figure 7. Undergraduate students on the University of Denver's Field Quarter Program stand with the Calmo family in Chemal, Guatemala, after we installed a standard fog collector. September 2008.

which will take many years to complete and will compete for time with teaching and service on campus. I know that I can publish results in development journals (that is, journals that are read by nongovernmental and governmental employees), especially on “how to” topics, but will this type of publication be recognized by tenure and promotion committees or by outside evaluators who gauge my contribution to the field of geography? This is where universities can offer time to faculty to retool and learn new literatures.

CONCLUSION AND A TALE OF CAUTION AMIDST OPTIMISM

The path outlined above must be tempered with reality and potentially a fair amount of finger wagging. I have been successful in my public-good ventures because of my store of traditional publications that may strengthen my case for tenure. However, I would not recommend the course I have taken to incoming tenure-track faculty in my discipline, especially under current university and tenure structures. The track I choose has been exhausting, both mentally and physically.

The university, at least at the higher levels of administration, while providing generous financial support for many public-good projects, has not provided structural support for those of us in disciplines or areas of research where public-good and service learning work is at odds with our traditional form of scholarship. Here I am not, as we say in Guatemala, a “mendigo con garrote” (beggar with a stick)! Indeed, I laud the university at which I work for its support of public good. However, DU, like many universities, needs to go the next step and recognize other models of scholarship, or at least support faculty as they transform their careers in an attempt to support a vision of more civically engaged universities. If the university fails to seriously examine this issue, it will find that only more senior faculty undertake public-good work. Moreover, the lack of serious action on behalf of the university will ensure that we remain mired in academic models of past decades. If universities want to produce globally competent citizens they must, as Brustein mentions, support faculty (who have serious research agendas abroad) in their efforts to include students in their research and service projects that emanate from research results. Not only will we fail to do serious public-good work abroad, but we also will fail to attract the best and brightest students who, in this world of rapid change, will drift to institutions that offer more dynamic solutions to the desire to act (Brustein 2007).

My struggle to combine public-good work with service learning and research also results from my training. I was trained as a geographer to contribute to the geographic literature. Like many of us, I was not trained to teach or perform public-good work that deviates far from traditional academic trajectories. Furthermore, I was not raised in an academic environment that showed me how to op-

erate outside of the traditional three-legged professorial model of research, teaching, and service. Unless we are trained otherwise in graduate school, the transition to other modes of scholarship is a long and arduous task that is concurrent with the traditional mode. It will be a long while before I can afford, in terms of time to read and absorb a new literature, adjust my publishing mode, and find new outlets that accommodate my new style of scholarship. I am hopeful that I may be able to make the transition to more public-good work easier by combining my traditional research methods and training with public-good work. Here I take the words of Patricia Limerick (2008, 360) to heart:

Here is the upshot: to become a university-based public scholar, a young person may well have to put that ambition into cold storage for a decade and a half. Go to graduate school, write a conventional dissertation, get a tenure-track job, publish in academic journals and in university presses, give papers at professional conferences to small groups of fellow specialists, comply with all the requirements of deference, conformity, and hoop jumping that narrow the road to tenure while also narrowing the travelers on that road, and *then* take up the applied work that appealed to you in the first place. You may need to write yourself a thorough and eloquent memo, early in this process, and store it in an easily remembered and retrievable place, to remind yourself of the postponed and mothballed ambition to connect with the world that got you psyched for this career in the first place.

My path is full of contradictions. Traditional academic training and structure afforded me the background and publications to conduct good public-good work. It is that same academic structure, however, that severely limits international service learning and the amount of public-good work I, and future faculty, can perform. I suggest a flexible academic structure that rewards the strength of each faculty person. In this manner, a university can still accomplish the important roles of research, teaching, and service, but in a nuanced mode appropriate and supportive of the civic responsibility of universities around the world.

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