Going Global with *Amigos de las Américas*: A unique service-learning opportunity for students of Spanish

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With or without the hyphen (and it does seem to be written both ways), the buzzword in today’s education is *service learning*. As educators strive to find new ways to cultivate a sense of global citizenship within their students, many have found that service learning is a highly effective tool for teaching students that we are all part of the human community. Over the past decade, increasing numbers of institutions have been exploring ways to incorporate service learning into their curricula. What many of them may not know is that the answer has been around for about fifty years, under the auspices of a program called *Amigos de las Américas*.

Since its foundation in 1965 by Guy Bevil, a youth pastor in Houston, Texas who wanted to give high school and college students the opportunity to experience a Peace Corps-type experience, *Amigos* has fielded more than 26,000 volunteers throughout Latin America. No longer affiliated with any religious institution, *Amigos* is unique in the level of responsibility that it grants its volunteers: participating youth emerge from the program with a greater sense of self, and the skills needed to become effective community leaders. After intensive training sessions in the language, the culture and in medical Spanish, *Amigos* volunteers spend from four to nine weeks living with a host family in what is usually a rural area in a developing country. Volunteers work with community leaders and others to inspire them into undertaking much-needed projects, as well as to collaborate with them in bringing their plans to fruition. As challenging as these tasks may be for the average 16-25 year old, the preparation that *Amigos* volunteers (or *vols*, as they are known within the organization) receive is so complete, and the organization is so well organized that recently the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta worked with directors at *Amigos*’s International Office in Houston to coordinate testing for the chikungunya virus on its volunteers who were returning from the Dominican Republic. In addition, in mid-October Tufts University announced that it has decided to grant college credit for the *Amigos* medical programs in Chinandega, Nicaragua and Barranquilla, Colombia (which are currently only available to college students). Locally, in Ohio, two universities, Kent State University and the University of Mount Union also grant credit for participation in all *Amigos* programs. (Mount Union even grants credit to high school students who complete a program and then enroll in a course at Mount Union.)

Although any interested person between the ages of 16 and 25 from anywhere in the United States can participate via the International Office in Houston, *Amigos* has chapters throughout the country, including one in Kent, Ohio. Chapters often subsidize the current average fee of $5,850 through fundraising activities, such as auctions, letter
writing and product sales. The Kent, Ohio Chapter of Amigos is committed to keeping out-of-pocket costs to a minimum, but recently had to raise its family fee from $1,900 to $2,300. Unfortunately, this year it will be necessary to raise the family fee even more. Funds for paying the rest of all fees and expenses are raised through collaborative efforts among the volunteers, board members and local charitable organizations. Financial help for the family fee may also be available on a case-by-case basis. Even before they leave, Amigos volunteers already feel they are a part of a vibrant, caring community that is sending them off into the world to make the greatest difference that they can.

Ohio Spanish educators can also join this engaging community in various ways: they can donate to the Ohio Chapter at www.amigosinternational.org, join the board in Kent or they can inform and educate their students about the amazing opportunities available through Amigos by using the Amigos Teacher Activity Packet, which is designed to be used with the Amigos website. The packet combines communicative and comprehension activities with photos, videos and other elements of the Amigos experience.

Interested in opening your students’ eyes to the unforgettable experience of Amigos? Please contact Dr. Gregg O. Courtad at (330) 829-8701 or courtago@mountunion.edu for information or the link to the Amigos Teacher Activity Packet.

Source: www.amigosinternational.org