

By Kari B. Henquinet

Cultivating Empathy in University-Peace Corps Partnerships

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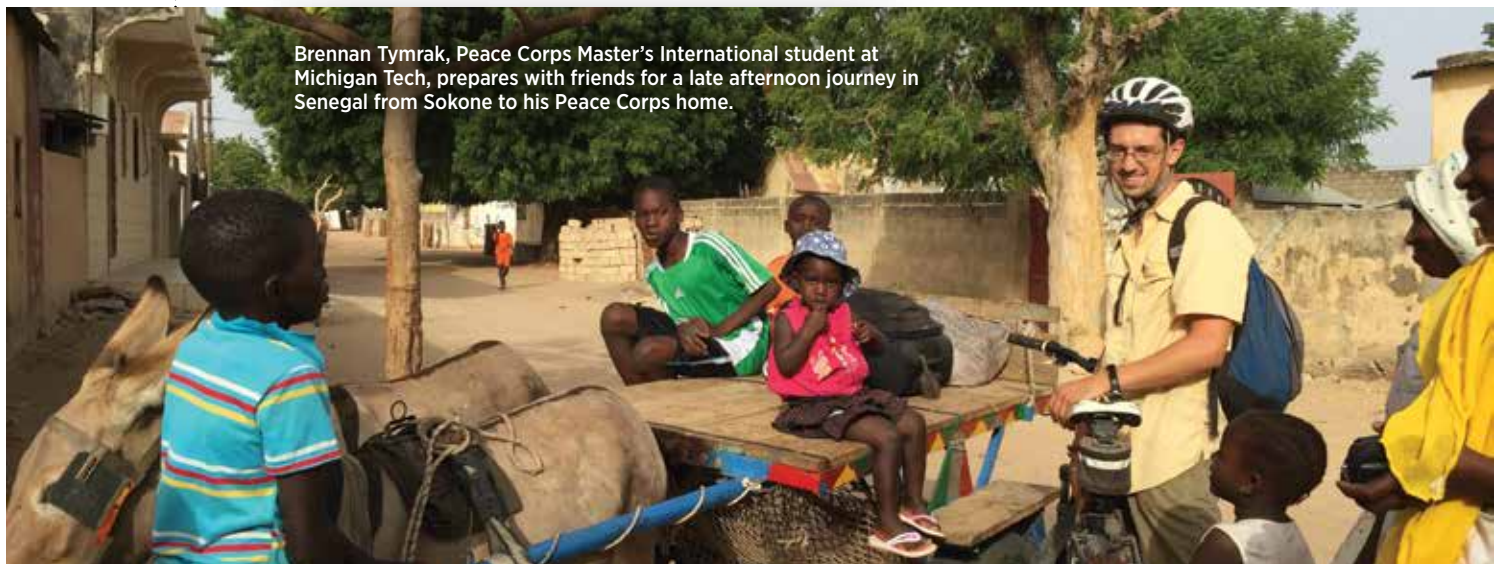
WITHIN MINUTES OF ARRIVING IN SOKONE, SENEGAL, I saw Brennan walking down the dusty and bustling main street to greet me. It had been more than two years since I last saw him on campus, before he left for Peace Corps. We actually met five years earlier when Brennan enrolled in my first-year seminar on global poverty. Now he was nearing the end of his master's degree program as a Peace Corps Master's International (PCMI) student in mechanical engineering at Michigan Technological University. Michigan Tech and more than 90 other universities in the nation offer master's international programs in which students earn a master's degree that integrates Peace Corps service into the program.¹

Brennan politely grabbed my suitcase, caked in a layer of red Sahelian soils, and led me to a nearby home, where relatives of his host family live. We waited out the heat of the day there before Brennan and the 7-year-old son of his host parents brought around a donkey cart that I would ride 7 kilometers back to the small, rural town where he lives. Beside me on the cart were three boys and a bag of ice that would provide refreshment after sundown during this month of Ramadan.

Brennan had already spent more than a year and a half living at his Peace Corps site and working as a Peace Corps agroforestry volunteer when I arrived. He had five months

left in his Peace Corps service. As the donkey cart rattled down the broken pavement, Brennan road his bike behind me, chatting as we traveled the last leg of the journey to his home. He had been fasting since 5:30 a.m., a personal choice he made to experience the month of Ramadan with all of his friends and neighbors, but he still had energy to pepper me with questions and fill me in on his work with farmers doing tree nurseries, cashew tree grafting and pruning, and dry season gardening.

When we arrived at his site, many introductions in the Sereer language followed, which I muddled through with translations from Brennan and responded to in French.



Brennan Tymrak, Peace Corps Master's International student at Michigan Tech, prepares with friends for a late afternoon journey in Senegal from Sokone to his Peace Corps home.

KARI B. HENQUINET



Peace Corps Master's International student Barb Michel waiting for the minibus to fill up so she can begin the journey back to her Peace Corps site in Senegal.

her perspective (not by assuming the person's position).³ The challenge is how to create pathways for students to develop empathy both in and out of the classroom.

While not for every student, Peace Corps university programs such as Master's International are a way for universities to internationalize curricula by opening pathways for intense, immersive learning experiences that can facilitate the development of empathy, one dimension of intercultural competence. Programs that combine experience with appropriate mentoring and reflection see their students gaining intercultural competence.⁴ The Peace Corps Master's International program allows universities to think creatively and strategically about ways to combine experience and reflection in what can become the ultimate global service learning student experience. As Michigan Tech PCMI students prepare for and experience Peace Corps, they are challenged to recognize their own cultural lens and try to view the world through another cultural lens. We start with case studies in required classes. While in Peace Corps, students are required to submit quarterly reports that provide a forum for reflection on their daily experiences and to articulate what they are learning. Their experience culminates in a master's thesis or report that integrates technical and cultural knowledge from the field. PCMI students also contribute to internationalizing campuses by their presence on campus and interactions with students and faculty who do not participate directly in this program.

Cultivating Empathy: Water Kettles, Language, Cattle, and Women

Cultivating empathy can be a real challenge, even among Peace Corps volunteers. During my Senegal trip, I was reminded of this when one volunteer laughed at a Senegalese man boarding a flight to Europe with a plastic water kettle, which she referred to using the derogatory term "poo kettle" because it is often used to clean oneself after using the toilet. "Doesn't he think there will be something to wipe with in the developed world?"

Brennan took me across the family compound to drop off my suitcase and show me his house, a one-room hut with a thatched roof. A couple of small tables and trunks contained all of his possessions needed for two years of volunteer service. A hammock hung between two trees in the yard, Brennan's bed for the hot season. He set up a screened tent for me on the other side of the yard, my bed for the next two nights. As the sun set, we moved out into the family courtyard of the compound where they would break the fast. We were served bread with tea and coffee—finally breakfast for Brennan and his host family at 7:45 p.m.

As I continued my journey through Senegal over the next week to visit three other Michigan Tech Peace Corps Master's International students, I was struck at each stop by the way that these U.S. students in their twenties had adapted to the rhythms of daily Senegalese life. As Peace Corps volunteers, they were each assigned to live in a small, rural town with a Senegalese host family. Apart from occasional Peace Corps trainings and meetings, these volunteers rarely saw other Americans. They have each become proficient in the dominant language of their area—Sereer, Mandinka, and Pulaar respectively—and live with no electricity,

running water, car, motorcycle, or refrigerator. The Peace Corps model of complete immersion and living at the level of the people with whom you are working creates ideal field conditions for these students to develop a deep sense of empathy that can be hard to find among development professionals and in university programs.

Empathy in Higher Education and the Peace Corps Master's International Program

Empathy has become a buzz word in discussions of student outcomes and goals of higher education in recent years. Articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Liberal Education*, and others have taken cracks at explaining its relevance in today's university curriculum. At Michigan Tech, I've been engaged in discussions about cultivating empathy through a global literacy advisory committee and among colleagues in our honors college. The AACU VALUE rubric on Intercultural Knowledge and Competence, one of the sources that we have used to inform our understanding of empathy at Michigan Tech, draws on J. Bennett² to define empathy as "the imaginary participation in another person's experience, including emotional and intellectual dimensions, by imagining his or

she asked. A bit stunned, I wondered if this American had ever, like me, stashed a roll of toilet paper into her luggage when traveling in West Africa, not to mention if she had considered other cultural uses of the kettle, such as ablution for daily prayers? Certainly this kind of derogatory and judgmental manner of speaking about cultural difference is commonly found on U.S. college campuses and in American society at-large. I filed this encounter in my mind as another example for students to illustrate lack of empathy and a basic inability to recognize how cultural behaviors invade the most intimate parts of all of our beings. American volunteers can certainly run the spectrum on intercultural sensitivity, and cultural immersion in Peace Corps does not necessarily guarantee that gains will be made.

Yet many volunteers do develop empathy for the people they live and work with over the course of their Peace Corps service. This moves beyond an idealizing or romanticizing of someone else, to a more realistic imagining of what it would be like to see the world through another set of eyes. Let's take the issue of language as an example. One does not often hear development experts explicitly call out how language abilities open and close doors of opportunity for people in

African countries. Yet spending time with our four PCMI students, I witnessed firsthand barriers they were experiencing to professional networks because of language. The Senegalese language they are each proficient in is the dominant language of their host town, but none of them spoke the official language—French—fluently, nor the most commonly spoken language of Senegal, Wolof. Without these languages of power at their disposal, they were often dubious that people in organizations that they would like to network with would be able to talk with them. The discussions I had about language with the volunteers led to an imagining for all of us about how it might be for a rural Senegalese farmer to navigate the world without languages of power at his or her disposal.

Another example of developing empathy was evident in discussions I had with volunteers about savings in Senegal. In Jeffrey Sachs's bestseller *The End of Poverty*, he explains that one of the reasons some countries fail to thrive is rooted in the inability of extremely poor households to save capital and invest. Yet Peace Corps volunteers living with Senegalese families quickly realize that the simple vignettes Sachs provides for increased savings and investment do not represent the whole story. Sachs, thinking from

the perspective of a free-market economist, suggests that households in low-income countries with a little extra capital should invest in a cow for savings and to increase income through improved animal traction, manure, or milk. What Sachs does not mention, but the Peace Corps Master's International students noted during my visit, is complexity. What happens when these hungry cows eat the crops in a neighboring field? They also noted how challenging it is for an individual to actually save in a society where social obligations are very strong for extended families to care for one another in times of need. They imagined what it might feel like for a struggling farmer in the Sahel—in fact they even know some—to lose much-needed crops to a wandering, hungry cow while also recognizing that purchasing cattle is a common and useful way to invest some capital when it comes along. Through their Peace Corps work, they partner with farmers to build live fences to keep cattle out of the fields. However, creating a live fence requires a significant investment of time and labor. The volunteers recognize that the choice to work on a live fence involves some risk—a farmer could start growing trees for the live fence in a nursery that are eaten by a hungry cow that breaks through the fence. The volunteers are developing the ability to see the situation from a number of perspectives and also start to settle into the idea that there are no easy solutions to complex problems.

Sometimes the process by which PCMI students develop empathy is not easily mapped, but the cognitive switch is noted upon return. One of our male engineering students, for example, explained how he had first noticed sexism and harassment of women as an "issue" in his host country when serving in the Peace Corps. In other words, he now saw that the ways in which women are treated in a society are patterned and systemic and not just individual acts of sexism. Upon returning to the United States, he noted that he was starting to notice these patterns in his own country as he follows the news. Seeing patterns of sexism in another culture opened a door for this student to begin to imagine women's systemic experi-



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ences in his home culture—to empathize.

As our first PCMI degree program reached its twentieth anniversary this year, we now have alumni working in USAID, EPA, engineering firms, humanitarian organizations, and many other leadership positions around the world. Seeing that we are sending out professionals who have developed empathy gives one hope for better policies, more appropriate technologies, and better-thought-out programs in their work. When students like Brennan graduate, they are more contemplative of ways in which development policies and programs succeed or fail on the ground. Understanding the perspective of Senegalese farmers, Brennan will be able to ask good questions in other contexts about how science, research, and policy affect people's lives. He'll also be cognizant of the ways in which patterns of daily life—eating, drinking, washing, working, praying, socializing—often differ between cultural groups, yet carry great significance in all of our identities as humans. Whether students pass through a Peace Corps-university partner program or another creative program that combines intercultural experience and reflection, these are the kinds of professionals we want to be sending out from our universities to tackle the world's greatest challenges. They can imagine the effects of a new policy, program, or technology from multiple perspectives and seek to better understand and incorporate those perspectives for more positive, inclusive outcomes. **IE**

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(ENDNOTES)

¹ Michigan Tech has had the largest Master's International campus in the nation for nine years in a row. See www.mtu.edu/peacecorps and www.peacecorps.gov/volunteer/graduate/mastersint/ for more information on Peace Corps Master's International.

² Janet M. Bennett, "Transition shock: Putting culture shock in perspective," in *Basic concepts of intercultural communication*, ed. Milton J. Bennett (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press., 1998) 215–224.

³ AACU VALUE rubric: <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/intercultural-knowledge>.

⁴ Michael Vande Berg, R. Michael Paige, and Kris Hemming Lou, eds., *Student Learning Abroad: What Our Students Are Learning, What They're Not, and What We Can Do About It* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2012).

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