From January 1st to 10th, I traveled to Guatemala to complete my self-designed experience entitled Service Learning in Guatemala. During my time on the trip, I studied the importance of cultural understanding and reciprocal relationships on the ability to effectively participate in community engagement. This study took the form of both learning about the country’s rich culture and history, as well as interacting with its citizens as we worked together to build sustainable communities. By better understanding the roots of the nation and by interacting with the people who call it home, I was able to develop a sense of understanding as to the norms, customs, and beliefs that govern the way people in Guatemala think. I was fortunate to travel to Antigua and Lake Atitlan, two of Guatemala’s most breathtaking and well-known cultural destinations, where I saw the fusion between the indigenous backbone of the country and the colonial Spanish influence that shaped it. In addition, I had the opportunity to engage in volunteer work when building stoves for an orphanage, chicken coops in a mountain town, and a house for a family whose previous house had recently fallen in. These service experiences were rewarding not only due to the thankfulness that was sent our way, but also because participating in these endeavors allowed for the construction and observation of reciprocal relationships in which each party had to give something of themselves to contribute to a more efficacious outcome. My trip was completed alongside 13 other University of Cincinnati students, through the student group Serve Beyond Cincinnati. In coordination with Homes from the Heart, a non-profit organization dedicated to building homes in sustainable communities through Central America and in the Caribbean, we came together to grow our cultural understanding while helping with construction projects.

The experience that I had in Guatemala was interesting in that it aligned closely with many of my expectations but soared above and beyond others I might have had of the country previously. For instance, many of the activities that we engaged in were planned ahead of time with a set itinerary outlined by Homes from the Heart. Due to this, I was very aware of what learning experiences were to be had on each day of my visit. This did not prepare me, however, for the comprehensive amount of learning that took place on each day. From the research that I conducted in writing my proposal, I was aware that my time in Guatemala should have taught me a great deal about the challenges and hardships faced by the people of Patzicia and other similar areas. I was unprepared, however, to be so completely immersed in my understanding of these problems while in pursuit of their solution. It was truly eye opening to be able to talk to the people who called these small mountain towns home and see how their daily lives reflected a strong will power and dedication to surmount any obstacles that came their way. Similarly, my desire to better understand and build reciprocal relationships was one that was readily and explicitly outlined in my proposal prior to my travel to Guatemala. Having read research on the White Savior Industrial Complex and Voluntourism prior to my departure, I set out to make my experience a learning opportunity that facilitated cooperation and avoided the “I am helping you” mindset that so often corrupts even the best of intentions in service trips similar to these. When building the roof, chicken coops, and stoves while in Guatemala, it seemed as if such a one-sided relationship could not have even be created, even if it was my goal to do so. Each group was so reliant on the expertise or help of the other that it was nigh on impossible for one to have worked without the other and still accomplish the task in such a timely manner. Seeing this coming-together in front of me was a surreal experience. After reading about it with research and hearing a similar mantra repeated in GlobeMed meetings week-in and week-out, it was extremely rewarding to understand on a personal level how much human connection and respectful cooperation really contribute to the development of any project.

As for the learning objectives with which I set out on my experience, I feel that I have taken significant steps towards achieving these goals and developing my understanding of community engagement. When it comes to possessing an awareness of purpose of service, including need for reciprocity, understanding of social issues, and ability to recognize those issues from multiple perspectives, many of the special moments during my experience helped me to better connect with this objective. For example, my time with our host family in Patzicia and while working with other men from the village taught me how much understanding others and their culture can contribute to a more efficacious level of community engagement. It was interesting to spend time with these wonderful people and learn so much about their culture and outlook on life. The time spent better relating with them in turn allowed for a more human connection while working or even learning about culture, and this enhanced the quality of the relationship quite significantly. One example that really highlights the importance of this learning objective comes in the form of an understanding of the rhythmic nature of Guatemalan culture. One of the main aspects of the country and its people that was most well-received by our group was the circadian rhythm that dominated all aspects of life. With early morning rooster calls and mid-afternoon
While we knew that 5:30 AM was the typical time to rise and shine, that 9:00 PM was the latest anyone slept, and that work was performed almost constantly in between, this was a very natural cycle. After noticing it, each member of our student team was able to become accustomed to this rhythm that governs life in Guatemala. This then allowed us to be more well-rested and in tune with the goings-on of the day, and made us more effective contributors to projects that we were working on. In this way, understanding a feature unique to the culture of Guatemala allowed us to make changes in our own lives to facilitate the community engagement process. This kind of change was reflective of the reciprocal attitude that permeated our time in Guatemala, which was seen with the level of care and kindness that our native host family displayed to us on a constant basis and the accommodations that they made to help utilize our skills and labor to help those who needed it. Working together on the worksite, we were able to form a partnership which utilized the expertise of locals and the manpower that we provided with our numbers. As a joint team, we were therefore able to accomplish a great deal in a shortened amount of time, a true testament to the power of cultural understanding and cooperation.

Before embarking on the trip, I also planned to get a better understanding of the learning objective that deals with relating, communicating, and working effectively with others towards sustainable social change. As I mentioned in my proposal, one of the biggest draws of this program was the sustainability that Homes from the Heart works towards with the construction of their houses and communities. On campus, I have had a strong focus on sustainability with my involvement in Student Government, as I believe it to be a central tenet to any beneficial development in society. Specifically, the groups in which I am a part are focused on developing sustainability that not only targets the environment, but also the economic and social communities which call that environment home. Before the trip, I lacked familiarity with how an initiative that addressed all three target areas in one fell swoop could be enacted. Working with Homes from the Heart gave me experience in learning how such a project can be created and implemented. By simply traveling the country and experiencing the wondrous sights that the varied landscapes provided, it was not difficult to develop an understanding of how Guatemala’s current environment helps to shape decision making when it comes to implementing change. The many rolling hills and mountains that call Guatemala home, for example, are as much a beautiful facet of the country as they are a challenge upon which to grow crops. Based on the accounts of community leaders in the mountain villages to which I traveled, I learned that the construction projects we were implementing tried to help with the problems associated with the steep slopes on which the crops were planted. By building houses on the bottom of the slopes, we were able to help slow the erosion in the area, and by building chicken coops with concrete floors, we were able to prevent any possible diseases in the ground from entering into the chickens’ feet. This environmental sustainability was paired with economic and social sustainability. Obviously, the initiatives that we took up helped with the economic development of the region. Arguably more importantly, however, these initiatives also brought together the community in which they were enacted. Whether it was the children in the orphanage who helped us build the stoves, the families in the mountain village with whom we worked on the chicken coops, or the men from the village who labored alongside us at the house construction site, with every project came a sense of community that sewed the fabric of the community together. These projects fostered a spirit of cooperation in which community members grew closer with one another and with us. This, in turn, brought about a stronger social fabric that our interpreter and host family made clear to us was the reason that the projects they facilitated were so successful. In this way, in an effort to achieve its environmental and economic sustainability goals, Homes from the Heart has also brought about a coming together that has made cooperative social change a well-received reality.

To prepare for my experience abroad, I focused on two major themes that were strongly linked. The first, taken from my learning in the classroom environment, dealt with the concept of voluntourism. Essentially, voluntourism is a practice whereby citizens of well-to-do countries travel to poorer ones with a stated mission of service, but an underlying purpose of vacationing and fun. By no means is it wrong to enjoy yourself while working with a community abroad, nor is it distasteful to travel to the marvelous sights and cultural attractions that this destination offers. The problem arises when the travel to these fun and exciting places becomes the motivator in and of itself. Essentially, when travel to a country stops being about learning more about that country’s traditions and practices to more efficaciously engage with the community and more about traveling abroad for enjoyment, the purpose of the service-learning mission is lost. Thus, on my trip, I focused myself on using my experience as a learning opportunity rather than as a vacation. For instance, when we traveled to the oft-visited tourist destination of Antigua, I decided to venture away from the markets geared for tourists, and instead traveled to traditional markets meant for the citizens of the city. This opened my eyes as to the actual culture of Antigua and her people, not the tourist façade that many others take at face value. My proficiency in Spanish helped with my endeavor to make the most of my experience in Guatemala, as well. One of my goals from the outset of
the trip was to utilize it as a way to practice my Spanish outside of the United States for the first time. I have taken Spanish language classes for nearly six years now and have never in that time had the opportunity to travel to a Spanish speaking country to develop my fluency or get a practical look at all the cultural customs and traditions that we learned so much about in the classroom. When in Guatemala, I maximized the immersive, experiential component of the experience by utilizing my proficiency to communicate with locals for both myself and for the team members who did not speak as fluently as I did. From many of these other students whose fluency was limited, the one thing they wish they had done differently prior to the trip was a resounding and ubiquitous desire to have reviewed Spanish more thoroughly. The language just presents a wonderful grounding and connective element that make communicating so much easier and more meaningful. The children in the orphanage, for example, especially enjoyed the fact that I could speak Spanish. As soon as they knew that I had a conversational fluency, they started talking away, telling me things from the type of day they were having to their favorite kind of candy. It was a really touching experience to have them so excited to converse with me because of my language ability, and made all the years in the classroom really worthwhile. With stories like this, I was able to turn the brief stay that I had in Guatemala into a truly transformative learning experience.

The other theme that I focused on while abroad was the “White Savior Complex”. This idea, which is very intertwined with that of voluntourism, is the notion that rich, well-off countries must come to the developing nations of the world, and “save” them by offering their supposedly extensive help and expertise. This, of course, is not only a very narrow-minded approach to international service efforts, but also an incorrect one. As I found in my experience in Guatemala, it is actually the locals who do most of the helping in the partnership, not the incoming foreigners. As I mentioned when addressing reciprocal relationships earlier, without the guidance, direction, and coordination offered by the sisters at the convent, our local translator, and our host family, our group would have been unable to make it out of the airport, much less help out with the building of well-thought-out, meaningful construction. Furthermore, knowledge of this theory allowed for me to take a proactive approach to prevent others from thinking that I was in Guatemala to act as this kind of “white savior”. While riding the bus from San Andres Itzapap, the small town in which the convent was situated, into Chimaltenango, the big city nearby, I sat next to a mother and her two small children. The smallest child, only a couple of years old, pointed at me and then questioningly asked his mom, “Gringo?”. Of course, as a Spanish speaker, I knew that he had asked her if I was American, so after she nodded yes to him, I started explaining where I was from and what I was doing in Guatemala. This allowed me to inform the family that I did not intend to “save” their country, but rather came to learn about it and to make a contribution in whatever way that I could towards a safer, healthier, and more sustainable environment. This went over well with the mother, and she explained that it was a nice change of pace to hear this from an American coming to her homeland. According to her and the insight provided by our translator and host family, many Guatemalans were wary of Americans and often distrusted their work, as they saw the foreigners coming in as self-important and self-serving. While for many that do come over, that is the case, with my experience and through our student group’s engagement, we tried to buck that trend while in Guatemala. Even with the small, simple interactions as with this family on the bus, it seems that steps are being taken to turn the tide on the savior mentality, and that we are contributing to this paradigm shift.

There are many parallels that I have drawn from my experience in Guatemala to my time inside and outside of the classroom. In the past, I was a student in the class PD3040: Exploring Health Professions that focused specifically on issues pertinent to service learning abroad. Within this class, I discussed the ideas of the White Savior Complex and Voluntourism, and talked about the importance of intention, as was brought up in my project proposal. It was not just with classes that specifically dealt with community engagement abroad, however, that I drew connections. Looking back, I was also able to make solid connections between my honors seminar POL3062: Global Religion and Politics and the strong focus on faith and family that serves as a cornerstone in Guatemalan culture. In class, we discussed frequently the differing role of importance that religion exerts over the lives of millions around the world. While in more-developed countries like the United States and much of Western Europe there is a push towards a non-specific, non-identifying “spirituality”, in many developing nations (specifically in Latin America, which has had a continual strong presence of Catholicism since colonization), religion is a central pillar to daily life. This was very evident in the convent, as the sisters would wake up before dawn to sweep the courtyard and sing songs of praise to the Virgin Mary, as well as in the general community at large. It noticed that in many of the mountain towns, women and girls were never seen wearing pants, but rather wore only dresses, even in the cold. When asked about this phenomenon, the translator for our group indicated that the reasoning behind it was cultural, but deeply rooted in religion. It was deemed improper and immodest for women to wear pants as men did. Even on the worksite, it was very clear that a remembrance of God was always held in the back of the minds of the workers. After finishing a time consuming task or engaging in exhaustive work, the first words on the lips of our fellow laborers were always “Ay, Dios Mio”. Outside of the classroom, I also drew connections with the
organization GlobeMed. For the longest time, I have heard tell of how rewarding a personal and reciprocal partnership can be, but was not able to understand fully such a relationship until having traveled to Guatemala. The friendships I have made and the positive interactions I have had with any Guatemalans have shown me that these partnerships can transcend race, religion, culture, or language, and can be grounded in a mutual understanding and appreciation gained through immersive cultural experience like the one in which I participated.

I hope to take the experiences I have had and build off of them into the future. First and foremost, through interaction with people and observation of the strings that tie together the nation, its citizens, and their customs, beliefs, and practices, I have reawakened in myself a desire to expand my horizons beyond simply the medical future towards which I see myself heading. With this in mind, I hope to sign up for online classes over the summer in disciplines such as anthropology, human geography, political science, and history. Taking these classes, I fell, will broaden my perspective on the world and will help me to better understand people and the many different aspects of their lives that shape them into who they are. Doing this will allow me more insight into how different factors of life can influence other factors, such as how religion might influence political beliefs, or how perhaps how geographic location can be influenced by history. I hope that a more robust knowledge in these areas will help me better understand different cultures, peoples, and communities, and will give me a strong basis from which to build my focus on personalized patient care as a physician down the road. I will also be looking to continue with an improvement of my Spanish language skills this summer in Spain. I knew before I left to Guatemala that I wanted to head to Madrid with the Romance Languages and Literatures Department, but my experience therein has made me all the more sure that this novel experience will be an incredibly positive one. I am excited at the opportunity to experience another cultural immersion, especially with the thought that this immersion will extend a full 3 weeks beyond the time I had in Guatemala. With this additional time in Spain, I really hope to master fluency while taking the time to get the most that I can out of the culture. Finally, moving forward, I look forward to participating in a similar experience in a different community. Whether it is through GlobeMed’s GROW Internship or perhaps another Serve Beyond Cincinnati trip, I really want to repeat my experience in a new community, so that I can both develop my cultural awareness and further my understanding of the socioeconomic realities that people around the globe face.

Since returning from Guatemala, I have had the opportunity to share my experience in several ways. The first was a presentation to GlobeMed that I gave alongside Kirsten Boone, Anthony Pantano, and Nathan Bond, other members of both GlobeMed and the Serve Beyond Cincinnati group that traveled over to Guatemala. The presentation that we gave lasted about 25 minutes and was given to roughly 40 GlobeMed members. For each day of the trip, we shared some of the meaningful stories and points that we learned, and also discussed how a number of things in which we developed an understanding related to the GlobeMed partnership with our partner organization in Thailand. The audience was comprised of students who already had a strong desire to engage in work that promoted social justice and health while focusing on the global arena, so it was really wonderful to present to them about a project that really pertained to their interests. Furthermore, instead of providing a rough overview of the trip, we were really able to dive in to some of the humanitarian and service-based aspects of the trip that many GlobeMed members already had familiarity with. This allowed for our presentation to transcend the obvious questions of itinerary and places visited and explored more of the reasons behind the trip and how these reasons translate to future endeavors and experiences. When talking with students after the presentation, I found that many of them were not surprised by how similar the relationships between our Serve Beyond Cincinnati team and the Guatemalan locals and between Social Action for Women and GlobeMed were. I, too, realized this, and found the experience to be one which helped me vocalize the similarities between our partnerships in a way that cemented my understanding.

I also had the opportunity to present to a smaller gathering of students at the most recent SustainUC meeting. It was during this meeting that I addressed some of the sustainability-focused aspects of the trip, especially the way that Homes from the Heart was able to address all three facets of sustainability—environmental, economic, and social—with a single set of projects. Members of the audience were leaders in their respective campus organizations that dealt with sustainability, so the presentation was a good experience to both introduce myself to the other, older students already making a positive impact in keeping UC green, while also giving them insight into how we might collectively improve our approaches in doing so. The students to whom I presented learned that it is very simple to foster a strong community while engaging in otherwise sustainable events if the projects on which people are working are ones that they are passionate about. In other words, by creating projects that focus on the wants and desires of students across campus, we can positively engage these students into coming out and making change. By doing so in the company of others, UC students will be able to strengthen the bonds between them and create a more long-term social sustainability. This meeting in particular was very helpful for the group as a whole and for me, specifically. After my presentation, we were able to
discuss possible ventures that tied in with the theme of my travel abroad, which helped me to develop new ideas and possible initiatives going forward. One idea, for example, is to have Residence Advisors use some of their funding from the RHA to fund programs that made recycling fun. With possible games and rewards for the “most green” room on each floor, these RA’s could slowly begin to change the culture of waste and the university and make us an even friendlier campus.

My last form of dissemination has yet to be completed. I was hoping to present at an Undergraduate Honors Association meeting on my experiences and the value of traveling abroad, but after seeing several presentations on this topic, I feel that I could utilize the first-hand knowledge that I gained about study abroad and apply it in a more useful setting. Thus, I am applying to become an Honors Ambassador and will hopefully through this opportunity be able to present on my learning in Guatemala to a Gateway to University Honors classroom or even discuss it with potential honors students as they decide whether or not UC is the best fit for them. I feel that through this form of dissemination, I will no longer be “preaching to the choir”, but will actually be able to give valuable insight about my experiences to those who have the most to gain from understanding all the opportunities that UC can offer them.