When University of Hartford students and faculty first arrived in Abheypur, a small village about an hour south of New Delhi, India, they found themselves in a very different world. Most of the villagers were living without running water or electricity. In the eight years since that first trip, groups of six to 20 students have been making annual trips to Abheypur to help improve the living conditions of those villagers.

For many students who sign up for the project, traveling to India will be their first experience living and working in a foreign country. To prepare them for what’s to come, faculty and returning students lend a helping hand. Faculty members act as mentors to the new students by providing them with the information needed to work on the various projects, as well as preparing them for the cultural differences they will experience in India. When it comes to traveling advice like what to wear, what to pack, and the dos and don’ts of India, new students rely on the guidance of students who have already taken the trip.

“Throughout the years, we have created a plan to go about getting things done in India, and many of the students help implement that template,” explains David Pines, associate professor of Civil, environmental, and biomedical engineering in the University of Hartford’s College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture, and faculty head of the program. It all began with an assignment to sophomores students in an engineering course in 2007 to design a solar-powered water pump and storage system and be able to build it with materials that would be locally available in Abheypur.

The engineering students first traveled to Abheypur in January 2008. They installed their pump successfully and began providing 10,000 gallons of easily accessible water daily to the village’s 3,000 residents, including more than 200 students at a local school for girls. For subsequent trips, they formed a student chapter of Engineers Without Borders and partnered with members of the professional Engineers Without Borders.

One goal of the water project was to improve the village children’s attendance at school. Another goal was to reduce the amount of time women and girls spent getting water for their families and homes. Before the pump was installed, women in the village had to walk up to a mile to reach a well, wait for their turn at the pump, and then walk back to their homes carrying water jugs on their heads. The electricity to run the pump was not reliable, and the women and girls could spend hours on just this one daily task.

With more reliable and faster access to water, it is hoped that the village’s women will have time to learn about small business, generate income, and improve their status. In addition to students who work on the engineering projects, University students have accompanied Marcia Hughes, assistant director of the College of Arts and Sciences Center for Social Research to Abheypur to study culture, family structure, and women’s issues in the village. The students will soon be interviewing village residents about the impact of the new water system and other issues.

In addition to the engineering projects in Abheypur, Marcia Hughes, assistant director of the University of Hartford’s College of Arts and Sciences Center for Social Research, has been traveling to India to study the culture, family structure, and especially women’s issues in the village. University students have accompanied her to interview members of the village, especially about the impact of the new water system. The engineering students are also involved in surveying the villagers so that they can better understand how to help the people of Abheypur.

In 2009, students from the University of Hartford’s Hartford Art School (HAS) created a visual campaign to help educate villagers on cleanliness, sharing, and respect for the new water technology. The HAS team also traveled to Abheypur, where they painted a mural on the side of the girls’ school. The program now looks to expand on this project by improving the distribution of water to surrounding villages. Over the semester break in January 2014, students and faculty will begin Phase I of a project at the neighboring village of Ghamroj. Although this village has more resources than Abheypur and has a well-defined water system consisting of wells, a pump, and storage tanks with taps, electricity runs everything. The villagers suffer the same uncertainty about when electricity to power the pump will be available.

“Right now, the electricity tends to be available in the middle of the night, which means that for those families who have smaller storage tanks, the women and girls have to wake up and fill them,” Pines explains. “We are trying to eliminate the middle-of-the-night routine by providing solar power to distribute water from the tanks during the day.”

“Students are designing solar panel structures and panels this semester that we will build with local supplies when we get to India. Our goal is to partner with the villagers to install reliable and sustainable technology that the local residents can operate and manage easily,” says Pines.

As the program becomes more established with every trip, faculty members have taken on more of a supervising and mentoring role on several projects. This gives students the ability to get more involved each year. “Once we got the ball rolling, [Professor] Pines gave our group space to develop a design and input our own ideas,” says civil engineering graduate Justin Howe ’09, who traveled to Abheypur during his junior year.

Howe is now pursuing a master’s degree in civil engineering at the University of Texas and believes that the experience he gained on his travels to India helped him land his first job as well as get accepted into graduate school. “The experience shows employers your ability to adapt to unfamiliar situations and environments, and willingness to assist others in need—all of which are very attractive attributes for various career paths,” explains Howe, who plans to get involved with the projects in India again, following the completion of his graduate program.

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The University of Hartford’s Hartford Art School (HAS) awarded 15 degrees in August to the second class of graduates of its International Limited-Residency MFA in Photography program. True to the program’s name, the 2013 class included students from Germany, Iceland, Japan, and Brazil, as well as American students from Houston, Texas; San Francisco, Calif.; Kansas City, Mo.; and Brooklyn, N.Y.

At the program’s thesis exhibition, renowned photographer and educator Robert Lyons, director of the program, said, “The program is exceeding my expectations, in terms of the intensity of the work and in terms of the applicants we are attracting.” He noted that one graduate of the program is already having a second photography book published. “This is really a cutting-edge program,” agreed Morgan Ashcom, a member of the Class of 2013 from Brooklyn. “The limited-residency aspect offers you the flexibility to explore new worlds without having to be in a set location,” he said.

Felipe Russo of Sao Paulo, Brazil, another member of the Class of 2013, echoed Ashcom’s sentiments. What first attracted him to the program was the quality of the faculty and the fact that he would be able to work at home and still attend school. During the course of the two-year program, he has become very close to his classmates. “The group is now my network. They are the ones that I want to share my work and ideas with,” he explained.

Class of 2013 graduate Dorothee Deiss of Berlin, Germany, said she came to the program because of Lyons, who was previously her teacher in Berlin. “This program was my only possibility for getting my master’s degree. I work full time.” She added that she loved the international element of the program, not just being able to visit and work in other locales but to work with people from other countries.

Lyons noted that other art schools around the United States are studying the model that has been created here at the University of Hartford to determine how they might try to duplicate it. Both the low-residency requirement and the international-student component make the program the first and only of its kind.
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