

HIV/AIDS in Mérida, Mexico: Education & Testing for Prevention



Victoria Aziz
2014 McBurney Fellow
McGill Institute for Health and
Social Policy

Project Overview

Student: Victoria Aziz

Department: BA. Honours International Development Studies,
Minors in German & Geography

Organization: Fundación BAI: Brazos Abiertos

Location: Mérida, Mexico

Mentor: Professor Uli Locher – Department of Sociology

Fellowship Duration: May 12th –July 20th, 2014



About the McBurney Latin America Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations over a period of 2 to 3 months. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

Contents

Project Overview	1
About the McBurney Latin America Fellowship Program	1
Contents	1
Fellowship Rationale and Objectives.....	2
Background	2
Activities	3
Challenges and Successes.....	5
What did I learn? A Personal Reflection.....	6
Community Implications and Further work	7
Is Change Needed? Further Recommendations.....	8
Advice for Future Fellows.....	9

Responding to HIV/AIDS in Mérida: Prevention & Treatment through Education

Fellowship Rationale and Objectives

The rationale for my fellowship was to address the critical issue of HIV/AIDS in the Yucatan by assisting a small non-profit organization called Brazos Abiertos located in Mérida. The Yucatan region in Mexico has a relatively high incidence of HIV/AIDS, as well as very limited resources available for HIV/AIDS education, prevention and treatment. These access issues coupled with the very negative stigma associated with HIV/AIDS have both proved to be significant barriers to improving the health and social conditions of communities living in the Yucatan. Brazos Abiertos and its projects are very important to the community, as Brazos Abiertos has a variety of programs to ensure prevention as the first step, as well as testing campaigns to raise awareness and treat those infected. HIV/AIDS is a critical issue that not only affects individuals, but also impacts families and communities, affecting their ability to grow and develop. The tremendous impact that HIV/AIDS has on individuals, families and communities demonstrates the need for efforts and projects such as those administered by Brazos Abiertos.

Prior to my arrival in Mexico, my objectives were to:

- Instruct the health education program in a school
- Create a plan and proposal for the second phase of the health education program to ensure its continuation
- Facilitate and plan HIV/AIDS workshops and campaigns in Mérida and surrounding areas
- Facilitate coordination amongst all actors involved in combatting HIV/AIDS in the community in an effort to enact changes in structural policies within Mérida
- Update all administrative records

Background

Brazos Abiertos was established as a non-profit organization in 2007, with a mandate to decrease the spread of HIV and sexually transmitted infections, as well as to improve access to healthcare and the quality of life of those living with HIV/AIDS in the Yucatan. Originally a non-profit corporation solely in the United States, a sister organization was created in the Yucatan and headed by Dr. Carlos Cabrera who remains the Director General of Brazos Abiertos to date. The Yucatan has one of the highest incidences of HIV/AIDS in Mexico, which has had and continues to have an enormous impact not only on the lives of those infected, but also on the broader

community. The critical issue of HIV/AIDS that has been ignored and minimized for so long severely lacked the support it needed.

Dr. Cabrera and his organization recognized this deficit in resources, support and education and have since been striving to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS and improve the lives of those living with it. Since the inception of Brazos Abiertos, important services such as free HIV testing, free condoms, educational workshops and free treatment and medicine have been provided to the citizens of Mérida. The organization has grown to include health campaigns in neighbouring regions, as well as the implementation of an educational health program at a local school.

As a very small non-governmental organization, one of the biggest challenges faced by Brazos Abiertos is securing funding and resources to ensure its continuance. In the past, the United States sister organization to Brazos Abiertos provided a substantial amount of the funding to this organization, however this has been cut back drastically. Donations now comprise the large majority of the organization's funding, thus the month to month resources available to the organization have recently been subject to immense fluctuation. This has made the future uncertain for critical programs such as the testing campaigns.

Activities

My role at the organization was comprised of 3 duties; the health education program, HIV testing campaigns and administrative duties. Although the health education program was my primary duty, I had to split my time between all 3 tasks since I was the only intern for most of the time at the organization.

Health Education Program: Cobay Chenku Highschool

When I first arrived I worked at Cobay Chenku Highschool with students aged roughly 14-17 who were finishing up the first phase of the health education program. Brazos Abiertos had initiated a 10-week health education program in this school, and it was my duty to take over the remaining weeks of planning and teaching lessons. The topics covered during these classes included anatomy, fertilization, menstruation, healthy relationships, sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections, contraceptive methods and HIV/AIDS. Each lesson plan consisted of a lecture, dynamic activities as well as a question period. The lessons were designed to be interactive and an emphasis was placed on creating an open, safe space in which the students were able to learn comfortably. This 10-week



May 12- July 20, 2014

health education program in the school comprised phase 1 of the overall health education program.

Once completed, I moved onto phase 2 of the program, which entailed training a select number of enthusiastic and willing students to become peer educators, thus taking over the education program. The plan for Phase 2 is to make the education program more sustainable, locally-relevant and eventually independent of Brazos Abiertos. The eventual goal is that these peer educators can conduct workshops in neighbouring regions and schools that currently lack access to information related to health. To prepare these students, I created a series of training workshops with topics such as evaluating and improving the education program, teaching strategies, how to create a safe space, review of all materials, practice teaching as well as discussing the future of the education program. In order to receive continued support from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, as well as the school director I created a proposal for the second phase of the program which included a detailed series of workshops to be conducted in the upcoming months. This proposal was meant to facilitate coordination amongst the different actors as well as garner support from the Ministry of Education for the second phase of the program and the peer educators that are continuing with it.

HIV/AIDS Testing Campaign

My second duty consisted of planning and preparing for an HIV/AIDS testing campaign in the neighbouring region of Isla Mujeres. Isla Mujeres has an extremely high incidence of HIV/AIDS, and Brazos Abiertos has held an annual testing and health campaign on the island for many years now. Due to the island's relative isolation, HIV has been spreading amongst its inhabitants quite rapidly. Access to health information and testing facilities is extremely limited on the island, which is why this yearly testing and educational campaign is critical for improved health of the inhabitants. Brazos Abiertos' campaign on the island consists of a free testing day held in a public area with rapid results, informational booths, as well as an intensive health education teaching day in the local high school. My role in preparing for the testing campaign was two-fold; preparing all the necessary testing materials and creating health education workshops for one-day of intensive instruction at a local school on the island.

The day of rapid testing on the island usually receives upwards of 300 visitors each year, thus requiring a lot of preparation and organization on the part of Brazos Abiertos. One of my duties involved preparing all of the testing materials, surveys and supplies needed for the rapid HIV tests.



Considering the high volume of people getting tested on one day, it was critical to have all materials organized in advance and information kits prepared beforehand.

The high incidence of HIV/AIDS on Isla Mujeres very seriously endangers the future of the youth on the island, their community and their future opportunities. Brazos Abiertos considered the various mechanisms through which they could help in combatting HIV/AIDS on the island, and one of the most important vehicles for change is the youth themselves. Through an intensive one-day workshop at the school on the island, Brazos Abiertos seeks to raise awareness about the risks associated with sexual activity so that these young students can make better-informed and healthier decisions. I created 4 intensive workshops covering themes including anatomy, fertilization, sexually transmitted infections, contraceptive methods, HIV/AIDS, empowerment, self-esteem and healthy relationships. Each workshop consisted of a presentation, diagrams, dynamic activities as well as a question period. Despite the very short time-frame of only a day, the intensive nature of these workshops gave the students a brief yet thorough overview of reproductive and sexual health and the associated risks.

Administrative Duties

Lastly, I performed a lot of organizational and administrative duties for the organization. Being a small organization run solely by the founding Director, Dr. Cabrera, with the help of various volunteers and interns throughout the year, Brazos Abiertos relies heavily upon interns to ensure that all administrative matters are in order. Every single person that has a rapid HIV test administered by Brazos Abiertos, be it at the office or at a health campaign, is required to fill out a pre-HIV consent form and questionnaire. It is highly important that these records are very efficiently organized, considering the extremely sensitive information they contain pertaining to the result of the HIV test. I was responsible for compiling the data from all outstanding pre-HIV test consent forms and questionnaires into a coherent data sheet.

Another one of my administrative duties entailed entering all of the pre- and post-surveys that we administered to the students at the school who received the education program. The goal of these surveys was to be able to evaluate the progress and success of the program, as well as to monitor any changes in the opinions of the students. I entered all the data from these surveys, and analyzed the results creating a trends and suggestions report. This analysis of the surveys aided me in the development of the second phase of the health education program, as I was able to incorporate the opinions and suggestions from the students. Although this task was less hands-on than some of my other duties, it was very important nonetheless. Feedback from the recipients and being critical of the program are both fundamentally important to ensure the continued success and relevance of the health education program.

Challenges and Successes

During my time in Mérida, I was able to accomplish a substantial amount, however my goals changed drastically from those which I initially set out. I was able to finish the first phase of the educational health program at a school, as well as commence the second, more independent phase of the program. I created a proposal and a series of workshops for the educational program,

which will take several weeks for the peer educators to complete. I had a big setback of having to reduce my time in Mexico due to family reasons, which I initially thought would affect my goals significantly. However, the second phase of the program demands less face-to-face interaction than I initially thought, so I was able to continue creating workshops from a distance. As for the actual implementation of the second phase of the education program, this was not able to begin during my time in Mérida. The small group of peer educator students that wish to continue with the second phase of the program began their summer vacation shortly before I departed, which means a considerable break of over 2 months before they return and can begin training. However, I was able to prepare and train an education student from a local university who wishes to take over the second phase of the education program and work with the peer educators.

I believe that what worked best during my internship was getting the opinions and perspectives of all parties involved before taking action. For my particular internship, I was working with the founding doctor of the organization, the school director and teachers, the students, as well as the Ministry of Education. This ensured that the program was going in a direction suitable to all parties involved, and had the full support of everyone.

The training I received from my organization involved a brief overview of each of the projects, the day-to-day activities of the office, as well as an introduction to the school and its staff. Considering the delicate nature of HIV testing and information, much attention was paid to reviewing how to address and teach these issues in an appropriate and sensitive manner. Additionally, training was completed related to dealing with patients who are already HIV positive that come to the office for treatment and consultations. However, my main task, which was that of teaching a reproductive health curriculum at a high school, did not come with very much training. Fortunately, I had a lot of training and experience in teaching reproductive health from a previous internship, so I immediately felt comfortable with the various topics. Materials I had previously created in a past internship, in conjunction with resources available at my office in Mérida both proved to be very valuable to me when creating lecture plans and workshops.

In addition to the training I received from my boss at my organization in Mexico, I also had support from my academic supervisor, Professor Uli Locher, before and during my internship. This internship marks my second time working with Professor Locher as my supervisor, thus we were already familiar working with each other before this internship. I felt very prepared before I left and comfortable to ask Professor Locher for any help or support during the internship. He has been a great resource and source of help during this process.

What did I learn? A Personal Reflection

The support and training I received from the IHSP, Professor Locher and my host organization all aided in making my fellowship experience an extremely positive one. Experiencing the challenges and benefits of working in the field at a non-governmental organization is an invaluable experience that has allowed me to think critically about the future roles of organizations like these, as well as my own future goals. The most valuable lesson that I have learned is to take initiative to accomplish what you deem necessary, and to explore all possible resources that can be of aid to you.

I have realized the power of organization and communication, in the sense that there are many different stakeholders with similar goals, and facilitating work and coordination between these different actors can have a powerful result. The IHSP prepared me to recognize the various actors involved in a given situation, and trained me in how to work with the different stakeholders to create a positive result. In the case of my internship, the Ministry of Education, the high school Cobay Chenku, students and volunteers, as well as my organization Brazos Abiertos are all working towards improving health and reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS, and this can be accomplished more effectively if all parties involved work together. Now that I understand the importance of coordination amongst the different actors, if I was able to do something differently during my internship I would have arranged for meetings facilitating interaction between these actors at an earlier stage in the education program.

Community Implications and Further work

My main project, the health education program, had both short-term and long-term goals. The short term goals included completing the 10-week health education sessions at the high school Cobay Chenku during my time there, which was accomplished. The students at Cobay Chenku received comprehensive and dynamic workshops on themes ranging from healthy relationships to contraceptive methods. These workshops comprised the first phase of the education program, the impact of which meant that these students were well-informed and made aware of the health risks associated with sexuality and the services available to them. A final survey I conducted with the students showed a much improved knowledge and understanding of the dangers and risks that they are susceptible to, as well as how they can protect themselves. Prior to these workshops, the majority of the students were unaware of the associated risks and dangers of sexual activities. Thus, I believe this group of students benefitted greatly from these workshops, and consider themselves much more prepared for their futures.

The long-term goals of the health education program include making the program more self-sufficient and locally-relevant, and these goals are embodied in the second phase of the program that I created. By training these students and empowering them with the knowledge and

tools necessary to teach others about the risks of HIV/AIDS and other reproductive health matters, they will be able to reach out to the more marginalized and poor surrounding regions in the Yucatan. Thus, the delivery of information as well as health services through various testing campaigns to these regions can be more easily accomplished. This will help to reduce dependency on the organization Brazos Abiertos for



May 12- July 20, 2014

providing health education, as the organization's ability to provide these services depends upon the availability of skilled interns, as well as the length of the intern's stay. By growing to include local peer educators in the health education program, some consistency will be provided which will help the program to maintain momentum.

I believe my internship and the work I did with my organization to have been beneficial to the community, as well as to the larger actors such as the Ministry of Education in Mexico. The students as well as the broader community recognize the need for prevention and are very open to any initiatives wishing to help with this. Our education program was designed with a long-term focus, so that it could make a meaningful difference within the community. The second phase allows the students to assume a leadership role. This will allow for a more locally-relevant perspective on how to disseminate information surrounding safe practices and HIV/AIDS within the community. My organization and the work I've done for it have created a much needed link between all the actors involved for change, including high school students, medicine students, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. The varying levels of actors demonstrates the integral role that my organization, Brazos Abiertos, and their education program plays in uniting all parties interested for the cause, and their potential for positive policy and structural change.

Is Change Needed? Further Recommendations

The Yucatan, and more specifically Mérida, is headed in the right direction and has begun to take the necessary steps in prevention, creating awareness and facilitating treatment of HIV/AIDS. It is my opinion that the next step should be turning these prevention and treatment efforts into official policy. Despite the very good work being done by Brazos Abiertos, there are limited by the small size of the organization. This is why I believe the next steps in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS and its treatment need to be taken by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, using Brazos Abiertos' various programs as models

My first recommendation is for sexual and reproductive health education to be a mandated part of the curriculum in all high schools in the Yucatan, not just the few schools selected by Brazos Abiertos to receive the education program. To ensure the continuation of health education in schools, a standard curriculum needs to be created that can be instructed in all schools within the Yucatan. The lesson plans and workshops of health education created by Brazos Abiertos can be used as a model or baseline for the formation of a health curriculum in the schools in conjunction with the materials and resources deemed appropriate by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. Officials from the Ministry of Education have already come to the schools to view and evaluate the work of Brazos Abiertos and their health education program. This is an important step in creating the necessary connections between the different actors, and can aid in future efforts of the Ministry of Education to implement a health education program on a much larger scale.

Secondly, testing campaigns need to be conducted in the Yucatan much more frequently, especially in the more rural and isolated regions. Brazos Abiertos is funded primarily by donations, and thus can only conduct a handful of testing campaigns each year. Testing campaigns are one of the easiest ways to test large numbers of people in a fast and efficient manner, and they should

become regular practice for the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Health has many more resources, in terms of both finances and employees, and could make HIV/AIDS testing accessible to many more citizens in the Yucatan if they conducted campaigns like those of Brazos Abiertos. People are much more willing to get tested for HIV/AIDS if a large campaign is happening in a convenient location near them where large numbers of people attend, rather than go individually to a hospital or clinic to get tested. Since awareness and treatment are so critical to stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS, I believe the Ministry of Health would be wise to invest in health and testing campaigns in the Yucatan.



Advice for Future Fellows

Undergraduate degrees aim to prepare us for our future studies and careers, whatever they may be. The options and opportunities available to us once we graduate seem endless, and it's quite intimidating trying to decide what type of career to pursue. Without a doubt, this fellowship has helped me to evaluate my future goals. Working in the field is an invaluable experience that helps tremendously when deciding on ones' future plans. Through this fellowship I've gained insight and first-hand knowledge of the benefits and challenges of working for a non-governmental organization in a developing country. This insight gained into the field of health, in turn, has inspired me to use my final year of university to focus on health-related courses which is but one small example of the impact this experience has had on my future plans. Furthermore, this fellowship gave me the amazing and unique opportunity to enact change in a meaningful way which is truly an indescribable feeling.

To any future McBurney fellows, my advice is to go into this experience with an open heart and mind, and not to be afraid to ask for help and advice. There are so many people eager and willing to help, such as past McBurney fellows and the helpful staff of the IHSP, and they want nothing more than for you to succeed in your aim to improve the living conditions of marginalized people. Although you cannot predict what situations and challenges you will face once abroad, McGill and the IHSP prepare you very well, and you will come out of this experience more knowledgeable and eager to continue working, wherever that may be.

--Victoria Aziz