Jiva Women and Children Project:
A Presentation by Kara McCloskey
The Leadership Scholars Certificate Program is a two-year selective, interdisciplinary certificate program that prepares Rutgers undergraduate women to be informed, innovative, and socially responsible leaders.

Leadership Scholars design and implement social action projects to expand their understanding of issues and problems and to develop leadership skills.

This project gives Scholars the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained about leadership, advocacy, and social change with the practical and experiential knowledge they have developed about a particular policy issue or problem through the field site placement. It also further develops leadership skills by giving undergraduates the opportunity to practice leadership through action.

To find out more please visit the Institute for Women’s Leadership’s website at http://iwl.rutgers.edu.
Background Information

• First visited Vrindavan to study Hinduism as part of a Rutgers Winter Study Abroad session

• Stayed at the Jiva Institute of Vedic Studies, which was founded by Dr. Satyanarayana Dasa to revive Vedic studies and culture in modern society

• Vrindavan is popular pilgrimage destination for Hindus because it is the childhood home of Krishna

• I played with the children in the Jiva neighborhood and after I left I worried about the many challenges they faced while living in rural poverty

• Decided to focus my Social Action Project on addressing the needs of these children
Research and Preparation

• Researched a variety of issues related to rural India in order to understand the situation faced by the children and how to best help them

• Literacy rates in Uttar Pradesh are 72.9% for men and just 59.3% for women (Census of India 2011)

• “The benefits of a girl’s education are generally seen as going to the family she marries into, thus providing little incentive to invest scarce resources, both human and monetary, into such an activity” (Sushrut Desai, “Gender Disparity in Primary Education: The Experience in India”)

• The United Nations reports that 40% of girls under the age of fourteen in India do not attend school

• Uneducated girls are completely dependent on their male relatives and rarely become economically independent
Living in Vrindavan

• There were several challenges I did not anticipate, which is why it is so important to be physically present in the development of grassroots projects.

• A local non-profit organization, Food for Life Vrindavan, is well-known for enrolling girls in local schools, but I quickly learned it did not have a good reputation.

• I also learned that simply enrolling the children in school does not guarantee a quality education, since most of the schools are poorly run.

• “Traditionally, the sector [education] has been characterized by poor infrastructure, underpaid teaching staff, disillusioned parents, and an unmotivated student population.” (Desai)

• “Teachers are demoralized by low pupil attendance and poor teaching conditions and so many fail to report for duty – in one study conducted in Uttar Pradesh up to two-thirds of teachers in sample primary schools were absent during school hours.” (Lori McDougall, “Gender Gap in Literacy in Uttar Pradesh”)
Jiva Women and Children Project

- I decided to partner with the Jiva Institute to revive its Jiva Women and Children Project, and I was instated as Director of this program

- We interviewed local teachers and eventually hired one to come to the neighborhood to teach for one hour a day, six days a week

- The lessons will focus primarily on English, which puts all of the students on a level playing field and has the potential to improve their lives regardless of their future jobs

- The sacred is interwoven into nearly every aspect of living in India, so it was important to provide an education steeped in Hindu thought and traditions

- The teacher will not only teach English through the retelling of their sacred stories, but he will also add an element of environmental awareness in educating the students about the pollution overtaking their sacred town
Valuable Lessons Learned

• Leadership often requires going beyond one’s comfort zone, which can be terrifying and prevent us from fulfilling our goals.

• Respect is incredibly important when working within a different culture. Showing interested in another culture and adhering to their traditions demonstrates respect, which makes people more trustworthy of you and your intentions.

• Flexibility is necessary when developing a social change project, since we all face unforeseeable obstacles and must learn to adapt. We do not have all the answers, especially when we are working within a different culture, and we cannot force things to be a certain way.

• Social change projects that are developed within another culture bring the issue of being an outsider. It is important to realize that we will always be outsiders, and that such a status affords special opportunities. Successful partnerships can be forged between Western donors and grassroots knowledge and leadership.
“What is any ocean but a multitude of drops?”
Works Cited


