

MARKING TIME BUT MISSING THE MARK: A CRITIQUE OF TEACHERS GROUP SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract: This document and website outlines likely issues that face volunteers/students who attend one of the Teachers Group schools in the United States. These include the Institute for International Cooperation and Development in Williamstown, MA or Dowagiac and the California Campus Teachers Group in Etna, CA. This document uses a combination of first person narrative, tax records, property records and news reports. The argument throughout the report is that for a number of reasons, practical, financial, emotional, and organizational, joining a TG school does not make a whole lot of sense.

Despite the low cost and requirements for a TG program, volunteers do not receive particularly valuable training during the preparation period. The emphasis on self-directed learning means that equivalent training can easily be replicated by anyone with access to a public library and the Internet for no cost. Likewise, the lessons gained through “experiences” can be duplicated through any number of means such as job experience, volunteering, and personal exploration, again at no cost.

Finally, it is quite possible to replicate the international travel and volunteer period oneself for less time and money than the TG schools require. This report outlines a strategy for doing this and provides a hypothetical trip to Guatemala complete with suggestions for language schools and avenues for volunteering.

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Introduction

This website is geared towards people thinking about joining a program at the Institute for International Cooperation and Development in Williamstown, MA or Dowagiac, MI (IICD-MA or IICD-MI) or the California Campus Teachers Group (CCTG) in Etna, CA.

You probably have seen the materials from these schools and like the way these schools present their programs. At the same time you've seen reports about corruption, financial irregularities and even suggestions that these groups are part of a cult. At this point you are probably uncertain what to believe. You may have even visited one of the campuses, met a lot of interesting people that you liked and are having trouble reconciling this with the stories listed at Tvindalert.

This site is an attempt to summarize a lot of material posted at Teachers Group (TG) sites and Tvindalert and present an overview of the volunteer experience. This webpage, however, makes no claims of objectivity (check here for an overview of the motivations and methodology used). Some may see this as unfairly biased against the TG schools but based on my experience I think this present a fairly good overview of the issues involved. I'm simply saying...

...You really don't get much from these schools and can do exactly what they do on your own...

...(or even better with a group of friends) and by so doing, have a better chance of having a good experience and really helping people in the developing world. In the end only you can judge whether to join one of these programs and I wish you luck whatever your decision is.

How to read this website

For people who aren't familiar with Tvind or the Teachers Group, I recommend that you read the Mission Control article or listen to the BBC report which provides background on the larger Teachers Group/Tvind organization. If you have some of this background you can dive right into how the schools are structured and the experience of the place. You can also jump straight to the FAQ that sketches out the basic argument and gives background on the motivation and methods of this website. Finally if you have already decided that the TG schools are not for you but are looking for alternatives, check out this page.

The Schools

All three schools are run by members of the Teachers Group (TG), the properties which they use are owned by AS Properties (a TG company), they all generally send people to work on Humana People to People which was founded and is run by the Teachers Group.

So although it may sound like there are lots of different non-profits working together they are basically different arms of a larger organization. Of course, each school is staffed by different personnel and so each is different but they all share a fairly standard 6 months of preparation at the school in the US, 6 months working in Africa or Central America, and 1-2 months follow-up in the US.

I'm not going to go into larger issues about what the Teachers Group is but suggest that you visit the Tvindalert site for further information. Because the programs offered by these schools are very similar I am going to treat them as the same. Things may have changed since this was written but the basic outlines should be fairly standard. The standard 13 month programs offered by these schools currently costs between \$3300 to \$3800 dollars.

The basic division on the value of TG schools is aptly summed up by the following quotes from two different IICD-MA volunteers.

I just recently became a student at IICD in Williamstown Mass. One week after driving up onto the mountain, I canceled my check and drove right back off of it. I do believe that much of the information on this site [the Tvindalert site] is embellished, but the basic facts are true. If you are going to dedicate one year or more of your life working for a cause you believe in, don't you think it should be one you believe in 100% beyond the shadow of any doubt.

I am a former IICD/Zimbabwe volunteer. I want to say that I had wonderful experiences on "the mountain" as we called it, in North Western Massachusetts. Many of my teammates and I are still in contact... We all knew why we were there. For the people of Zimbabwe. To learn to have respect for a foreign culture. To realize how lucky we are to live in places where education, food, and shelter are easy to come by. I will never forget the many faces that smiled at me day after day during my 6 month adventure in Africa. It was well worth it for me.

Confused? You're in good company. Both quotes suggest a very complicated situation. The first person decided to leave the program but is skeptical of some of the reports posted at Tvindalert and the second is positive towards IICD but tends to focus on aspects that are not directly attributable to IICD, i.e., the other volunteers and the people of Zimbabwe.

The rest of the website is spent examining from whence these attitudes come.

The preparation period

The programs are generally divided into three parts (1) the preparation period, (2) the international period, and (3) the follow-up period. The philosophy behind the training program is quite exciting and makes the individual the engine of his or her own education.

Knowledge and information, that for hundreds of years only belonged to the “elite” is now available for a more “common ownership”...the Internet allows information and knowledge to freely pass hands and cross borders...The time is over for the Teacher that knows it all...So lets throw all the traditional teachers out of the schools, liberate the students and allow them to adapt to these new times and be allowed to start to learn! Some of the very best teachers that we know are called: Curiosity, eagerness, and thirst for knowledge & understanding....This Program is quite a brave attempt to release these forces and count on them as a basic training tool to provide well-trained Development Instructors for the TCE projects in Africa.

Thus, the training programs offered by the Teachers Group generally provides little in the form of formal training and rely on self-directed learning. While potential empowering it also has the effect of relieving the school of much of the responsibility of ensuring quality learning. If someone feels that they are not gaining enough knowledge it is largely cast as their failing. An obvious issue is, If learning is self-directed why need take place at the school? More on that later.

In practice time in the training program is broken down roughly between studies (20%), courses (25%), and experiences (55 %). The exact percentages will vary but all schools divide up the time in this manner. Let's take a closer look at each.

Studies

This includes cultural studies and history of the country you are going. These are primarily self taught or based on another group member's research and report. In addition one may encounter the Definition modern Means/methods of education (DmM) which is both a technique philosophy and a computer based educational tool.

In general reports on this aspect are not good. A volunteer at IICD-MI (2002) writes:

The DmM which is bragged about being a HUGE database of information which we can learn from, was a HUGE waste of time, EVERYBODY...had stopped doing the DmM system after the second week of training.

A IICD-MA volunteer notes:

It was such a crazy experience. I remember some crazy talks where [the director of IICD-MA] promoted the glories of North Korea, presented a just plain bizarre history of rice cultivation, and argued that Pol Pot wasn't so bad!! It would have been amusing accepted for the fact that he honestly believe what he was saying.

It is certainly possible to acquaint oneself with the culture and history of a country during this time but since much of the information comes from books or the computer it seems easily substitutable by visiting a public library. Of course there is the possibility of learning from other group members and TG members but there is no way of knowing the level of knowledge and experience that they will have.

Courses

According to the CCTG website, courses are things one does together with the group and include sports, group meetings, assemblies, and language training. Language classes are also conduct via the self-taught method and in my opinion present particular problems for people. The TG schools argue:

you cannot expect to become fluent in a language you have never studied before. The goal of language training is to provide you a strong foundation for immersion in the language once you are abroad so that you can quickly learn it through practice and daily interactions with native speakers. (IICD-MA website)

However, the feelings of a volunteer argue that such language training is spotty. As reported by an IICD-MA group in 1991:

The language training at the school was inadequate and poorly conducted. A beginning Spanish class of four members, that we attended, was taught by the leader of our group, ...a non-native, non-fluent speaker with a poor grasp of grammatical rules. Often our instructor could not provide us with answers to questions regarding grammar, technique, or usage....We had class five days a week for a scheduled three hour period. Often, however this time was pre-empted by other activities so that the actual time spent in class was much less....If it weren't for one member of our group who is fluent in Spanish, having studied the language intensively and lived for some time in South America and in the Dominican Republic students requiring intermediate language training would not have even had an instructor....The sum total of the resources available for Spanish instruction were a few outdated Spanish textbooks, dog-eared photocopied booklets with dialogues and exercises, and a couple of unlabeled video tapes with newsclips in Spanish.

A similar assessment is made by the IICD-MI (2002) volunteer:

In my school we had nobody who had experience to teach tonga [language spoken in Zambia] and we were being taught by our own fellow volunteer who was learning straight out of the FEW books about tonga in the school...

Of course it is possible to acquire some language skills via this method and once you are immersed in another country it will happen more quickly. However, having studied five languages in a wide range of contexts I feel strongly that the TG model of self-study is the least productive way to acquire language skills, particularly for new speakers. As I'll argue later, there are many opportunities to learn languages in a structured setting for as little as \$100 per week including room and board.

Experiences

A central part of the training period are experiences, a loosely defined concept that includes fundraising, sports, engaging in physical challenges. The IICD-MA site notes that:

Life experiences are rarely recognized in school's schedules or training. We, however, view experiences - activities and thoughts outside formal curriculum - as a valuable part of education. We encourage you to reflect upon the varied experiences you have at IICD as a means of preparing yourself to be open and alert, and ready to take in and interpret new impressions while you are abroad.

Again the stated purpose of this component is used in other fields, i.e., building self-confidence and team dynamics, it often takes over a lot of the time spent during the training period. As a volunteer from IICD-MI (2000) notes:

95 percent of my time...spent taking care of the building, fundraising, cooking, cleaning, organizing for special events like Family Weekend, a trip to Denmark to see the "real reason we were here", and an Open House for the neighboring community.

Most of the time is spent on building projects, cooking/cleaning/maintaining the school, fundraising or other activities that don't really address how to approach the development issue that volunteers face. The TG often argues that these activities build character and help people learn to take on difficult project. There is a point there but at the same time one can learn to work hard and persevere anywhere. There seems little reason to pay for this experience when you can get a job (requiring hard work and perseverance) which will also pay you to gain these life lessons.

One of the biggest realms of experience at TG schools is fundraising and the schools generate between 30 to 43 percent of their revenue from this source. Fundraising is not a pleasant activity and to their credit the TG schools are generally upfront about the fact that people will be fundraising for the schools. Although the exact figure may change, the amount appears to be between 6,000 and 7,000 dollars gathered largely during the

preparation period. For example IICD-MI is quite upfront, "Fundraising is required of all IICD participants." In addition to financing the organization and keeping tuitions low the IICD-MI websites argues:

Fundraising also enables us to share our message for the need for global action in development, and gives many North Americans the opportunity to contribute to such work in developing countries in a very direct way by telling others about the situation there.. It also helps our participants to develop communication skills and to verbalize their goals / conviction for the work they will be doing abroad. At the same time you must be patient and endure in the times when reaching your goal is difficult. What makes Fundraising fun and achievable is that it is a "team effort", in which everyone contributes to reaching the goal.

This is actually a rather compelling argument that combines elements of outreach to a large community and the development of personal skills and self-confidence. Any organization needs to ensure its financial survival and while not fun it is a necessary part of many non-profit organizations. However, there are a couple of issues that are worth thinking about.

Time spent fund-raising

First, is the amount of time during the preparation period devoted to fundraising. CCTG lists seven weeks out a total of 24 weeks or in other words about 30 percent of the preparation period. The process of fund-raising is time away from studies and is very intense. A former TG member notes:

Everyday up to 10 hours of aggressive street solicitation or door to door canvassing... Everyone has a goal to reach and we are not quitting until all the money is raised. Each person on has to raise \$5,600 in seven weeks [this amount varies]

None of is necessarily bad in and of itself but the fund-raising period does represent a considerable amount of the preparation period. A number of participants note that the fundraising overshadows the rest of the training:

The energy of the TG members was clearly on fund-raising and left little time for the... "training" offered and left us fairly unprepared.

This focus on fund-raising at the expense of other aspects of the programs is particularly forcibly evident in a recent case at IICD-MI. Although it is unclear how often this takes place a volunteer at IICD-MI (2002) reports:

My fellow volunteers on the Guatemala team found out that they didn't have a project to go to the DAY they came back from their FINAL fundraising trip....

a project completely crashes and burns that the training schools would at least have some idea that the project was in trouble

While this collapse of the Guatemala program was not directly due to IICD-MI's actions it was the partner organization, Humana, selected by IICD-MI and staffed by TG members that bore the responsibility. Still IICD-MI did provide the volunteers with refunds of their fees although they kept the registration fees and all the funds raised by the participants.

Support of the Schools to the Fundraisers

Another question is the support provided by the TG schools to the students that are fundraising. Although it is not clear how often this is the case there are reports that these canvassing campaigns are conducted without first getting permits from the local authorities.

One student was stopped by the police while canvassing for funds in a local town. She was told that IICD had not received authorization for solicitation in that town. When this was reported to the director of the Institute, he angrily told her she should not have stopped canvassing.

While perhaps not particularly serious, this negligence on the part of IICD-MA placed a volunteer in the uncomfortable encounter with the police. In addition, fundraising generally takes place in cities that are at least several hours away from the schools and accommodations consist of whatever the group can arrange for free.

What are you fund-raising for?

People may dislike fund-raising but it is clear that it is a good way to gather funds and many people feel that since they are raising money for a good cause it is justified. After all billions of people are living in poverty and millions are dying of AIDs so what are a few weeks of your own personal discomfort? But an important question to ask is...

...How is the money you are fundraising helping people in development countries?

This is less clear because the money raised during the preparation period covers the school's expenses including rent, salaries and expenses of the program including your air fare.

The tax returns filed by IICD-MA and IICD-MI in 1999 and 2000 outline both the source of the schools' income and its expenses. Although the amount fluctuates yearly IICD-MA and IICD-MI have derived as much as 43% and 59% of their income from fundraising. The relevant point here is that almost all the expenses relate to running the schools and sending people abroad rather than direct aid to development projects. There

isn't necessarily anything wrong with this but one should be honest in that the end result of your fund-raising \$6,000 is six months of your time in a developing country context where average annual incomes are measured in hundreds of dollars.

Let me be clear. I am NOT suggesting that there isn't value in people from the US and industrialized countries going to Africa, Asia and Latin America and working on projects. However, two of the big and direct beneficiaries of the fund-raising is the person doing the fund-raising who gets to go abroad, and the TG schools which get to pay their mortgage and staff. As a fund-raiser you have a responsibility to the people from whom you are soliciting funds to ensure that something valuable comes from your six months abroad. Unfortunately, as I outline in the international section there are serious concerns with the viability and value of TG projects.

To conclude, I believe that one really does not get much training or valuable experience in the preparation period at a TG school for the time spent and the money you pay and solicit from people on the street. As a former volunteer notes:

Volunteers need to bring \$5,000 and fundraise another \$6,000 because that's what it costs to train, vaccinate, provide health insurance, purchase flights, feed, pay rent for a group of DIs. This is also a bunch of you-know-what. First of all they don't train us. Second of all they have a budget of \$3/day for food. This buys the lowest quality food. So why are we there? Why does IICD exist? Well, good question. If they don't train us, why do we need to pay rent and eat lousy food for 5 ½ months? Why don't we just get vaccinated and go?

I think this argument is one of the strongest against not participating in the preparation period. As I outline in the alternatives section you can take the same amount of time, spend studying and preparing on your own, meet interesting folks and form tight friendships, travel to distant locations and find ways to make a difference without a TG school. It's a lot easier than you think.

Finances

I may develop this page on TG school finances further but for now this is simply an accounting of the revenue sources and expenses for IICD-MA and IICD-MI. The categories I use here are based on the ones listed in the IRS tax forms filed by the schools and are likely different from those used by the schools in presentations. These categories, however, give a good overview of how the money is spent and the surplus/deficits of the schools.

One thing that is important to emphasize is that the net surplus/deficits reported by both schools does not include the value of the Williamstown and Dowagiac properties since they are owned by the TG company AS Properties and leased to the schools. This arrangement has the effect of obscuring the considerable monetary gains received through appreciation and improvements to these properties.

In my mind a more accurate assessment of the net worth of the schools would also include the value of the property. Legally the TG schools can claim that their landlord (AS Properties) has been the one to capture this gain but in practice the fact that AS Properties is a company controlled by the Teachers Group it is they who have benefited. It seems largely a game of smoke and mirrors.

And the gains are considerable. For example the Teachers Group purchased the Williamstown property in 1989 for \$550,000 and its current assessed value (based on tax records) is \$1,075,000. This represents a gain of more than half a million dollars. In addition one should also include approximately \$100,000 of the principal of the mortgage that has been paid off since the TG acquired the property. (This assumes an interest rate of 7.5 percent, a mortgage amount of \$550,000 and 13 years of payment)

IICD-MA Source of Revenue and Expenses, 1999 & 2000

INCOME	1999		2000	
	%	\$	%	\$
Tuitions	39.7	294,195	34.3	268,844
Fundraising	42.6	316,021	30.9	242,435
HPP Training [1]	13.2	98,008	11.4	89,167
Sales of Assets [2]	-0.5	(4,049)	13.4	105,403
Other Revenue	4.8	35,758	9.9	77,437
Interest	0.2	1,145	0.1	1,115
TOTAL	100	\$741,078	100	\$784,401
EXPENSES	1999		2000	
	%	\$	%	\$
Mortgage/Occupancy/Food	18.7	134,642	24.2	167,802
Overhead/Admin/Fundraising/Advertising	17.6	126,154	17.3	120,337
Travel	23.2	166,982	15.8	109,805
Other Salaries and Benefits	13.9	99,969	14.9	103,376
Supplies/Phone/Postage/Printing	7.7	55,292	10.1	69,713
Scholarships	4.5	32,615	6.0	41,652
Depreciation	6.2	44,215	4.6	31,671
Insurance	5.5	39,745	4.4	30,749
Misc.	2.6	18,323	2.4	16,401
Grants to Development Programs	0.1	530	0.3	2,100
TOTAL	100	\$718,467	100	\$693,606
Net Excess		22,611		90,795
IICD-MA Current Surplus [3]		237,142		327,937

The original tax forms (1999 & 2000) can be downloaded for you own inspection.

[1] I believe that the category HPP Training is money paid by another TG organization, Humana, to IICD-MA for the training of volunteers.

[2] Sales of Assets is a difficult category to understand. In 2000 in involved some kind of transaction (debt-forgiveness) between IICD-MA and AS Properties, the TG company which owns all the TG school properties in the US.

[3] According to IICD-MA's 2000 tax filing, it had a surplus of \$327,000 at the end of 2000. The bulk of this surplus, however, was not in the form of liquid assets, i.e., cash, but held as loans of 93,558 to IICD-MI and 220,225 to AS Properties. The exact details of these arrangements (particularly the loan to AS Properties) are unclear from these tax records.

IICD-MI Source of Revenue and Expenses, 1999 & 2000

INCOME	1999		2000	
	%	\$	%	\$
Tuitions	46.8	50,432	40.7	126,827
Fundraising	53.1	57,212	59.2	184,454
Other Revenue	0.0	52	0.0	27
Interest	0.0	34	0.0	64
TOTAL	100	107,730	100	311,372
EXPENSES	1999		2000	
	%	\$	%	\$
Overhead/Admin/Fundraising/Advertising	54.8	91,350	42.3	144,588
Food/Occupancy/Food	18.2	30,400	29.7	101,491
Travel	8.9	14,840	10.3	35,266
Other Salaries and Benefits	11.4	18,921	9.5	32,332
Supplies/Phone/Postage/Printing	3.7	6,206	3.6	12,185
Misc	1.0	1,712	3.1	10,593
Insurance and Health	1.1	1,752	0.8	2,847
Depreciation	0.4	665	0.8	2,712
Scholarships	0.0	-	0.0	-
Grants to Development Programs	0.0	-	0.0	-
Car	0.5	753		-
TOTAL	100	166,599	100	342,014
Net Excess/Deficit		(58,869)		(30,642)
IICD-MI Current Deficit [1]		(106,767)		(137,409)

The original tax forms (1999 & 2000) can be downloaded for you own inspection.

[1] It appears that most of the deficit of IICD-MI consists of loans due to IICD-MA.

The International period

In a very real sense the international period is the heart and soul of the TG programs. It is why people put up with fund-raising and is what attracts them to the program in the first place. Many people feel that this experience makes up for whatever problems or issues they had with the schools. It is not that hard to find people who are quite positive about the International period. As the following former volunteers note:

I went to IICD and did a programme to Angola, Africa. The six months were not easy, mostly because fundraising is no easy task. But I'd do everything again!...the members of the Teachers Group I met in Africa, that by far don't live a glorious life in the bushes in Africa. they work very hard, and are helping many people indeed

It opened a door for me, for my future, and has created a new me...It was an experience of a life time.

I have to say it was one of the most enjoyable time of my life...I went to Africa and did my job. I learned alot from that as well

I am a past IICD/Zimbabwe volunteer....I will say there is a lot of "un"organization within DAPP. Plenty of money floating out there but never really making into our projects. That is all I can account for. My six months abroad were scary, confusing, and also the most wonderful 6 months of my life. I was able to bring something to the people I met in Zimbabwe and they gave me so much to take home. I think that is what is important.

At the same time there have been a number of reports that programs that members of the TG go to are troubled by mis-management and disorganization. These problems include issues of volunteer safety, project organization, the ability to work in a particular country and the viability of projects.

Volunteer safety

This issue is of real concern for volunteers and has been featured to great extent within news reports and Tvindalert. Therefore, I will not focus on this that much other than to suggest that readers consult the comments made by former volunteers.

This decision reflects my memories of my own motivations for joining IICD-MA. I wanted adventure and knew that there were risks associated with my international travel. I think most people have a sense of this but decide that it is worth doing anyway. It's part of the bravado associated with the desire for adventure.

Overall I suspect that the larger risk for volunteers are health related rather than physical. Volunteers don't have to live in luxury but ensuring that they have a safe place to sleep,

clean water and food should be the first priority. Yes, many people where volunteers are working do not have these things but that will be the case whether they are there or not. It's simply counterproductive and inefficient to spend thousands of dollars to travel thousands of miles simply to get sick and be unable to work.

Visas and Bureaucracy

The most basic requirement of the international phase TG programs is that the volunteers successfully arrive in their target country. However, even this simply task is by no means guaranteed. As an IICD-MA volunteer notes:

My group studied Swahili and East African history for two months, in preparation to go to Tanzania. Then, after a month of waiting in Kenya, our visas to Tanzania were denied. We were sent to Zambia without knowing anything about the local history, culture, or languages.

A recent IICD-MI team to Guatemala had a related experience when nine slots in a Humana project dropped to three leaving the volunteers in limbo. Even if volunteers are able to successfully enter the target country they often face of negotiating bureaucratic hurdles that could have been avoided with some simple forethought on the part of the TG school. As an IICD-MI volunteer notes,

We marked off "other" rather than "tourist" because [the TG leader of IICD-MI] KNEW that we would get a special one-year visa allowing us to do volunteer work in India. [the TG leader of IICD-MI] returned with our passports with a 6-month tourist visa glued in. That meant that our visas expired on June 13, 2001. Unfortunately our flight back, at the end of 6 months of volunteer work, was July 25.

These kind of difficulties can result in considerable waste of time. In the above case, this mistake created weeks of needless legwork to try and get extension of visas once the group was in India. This is particularly frustrating when it represents time that could be spent on development projects. In some cases it has brought about an abrupt ending of an international stay.

After three months, the IICD volunteers were kicked out of the country, because we were working on tourist visas.

Project Organization

There are a number of reports which document a lack of preparation in the host country in anticipation of the volunteers arrive. This spans things as complex as having resources available for projects to even being aware that a team was arriving and arranging to meet them at the airport. As one volunteer notes.

Nobody met us when we arrived in Mozambique, we had to get over priced taxis in the dark to the project in the capital where we would await transfer to the provinces. When we arrived, the project leader had not heard we were coming and there was no accommodation for us. Locally based volunteers were kicked out of their rooms to get us in. We shared beds with each other and some slept on the floor (with cockroaches etc)...

Another volunteer going to India notes that they faced open hostility from development workers already in place

When the 5 of us who were working in Kutina, the small village that was the headquarters for the Alwar Village Development Project, arrived, no one bothered to welcome us. I later learned that the Project Leader, A, had spoken badly about us, saying outright that we were neither needed nor wanted, and the rest of the staff followed his lead. A few weeks later, when a few of us were going off by bus to the nearest town to check our email, A said, "And I hope you never come back."

This raises serious concerns whether volunteers coming to these locations will actually be put to good use. The TG schools emphasize self-reliance but if the contacts in the countries are unable/unwilling to provide even a little assistance one wonders about the long term viability of these project. Moreover, if self-reliance is the watchword for the international period, why does one need to go through the TG/Humana program?

Project Appropriateness and viability

Other reports note that the projects run by Humana face serious problems in terms of appropriateness and long-term viability. One volunteer notes:

Our first day in the field, we were approached by a group of Zambian farmers who told us that the project had stolen their land. As soon as that crisis was dealt with, other problems developed. We discovered that the Zambian workers on the project were applying pesticides on the project's garden, without training or protective gear. The project we worked on, a tree planting project, had been designed by a European gardener with little understanding of Zambian climate, culture, or agriculture.

Volunteers also have expressed disappointment in the resources for project that were made available to them during the International period.

I am a former IICD/Zimbabwe volunteer... I do not agree with the way Humana is run. I visited the Humana headquarters up in the hills of Zimbabwe and saw it many times as I walked to catch a bus. I saw with my own eyes just how much money they have. I felt the frustration of this realization and tried to

come to terms with the fact that I couldn't get any money for my own project in the village where I worked.

Another volunteer simply observes,

My last comments, are that the ADPP projects in Africa, are run to less than professional standards, and I would never work with them again.

This had the effect of creating a situation where as the same volunteer notes:

When I revisited the project in 1998, I found that all of the hundreds of trees we had planted were gone--destroyed by insects, rain, and just plain neglect, since all but six of the 140 Zambian workers had been fired. Some of the former workers told me that the layoffs occurred with very little warning, leading to a great deal of resentment against the organization as people struggled to feed their families.

Still some Humana projects are probably well-run and it is important to acknowledge that there are plenty of non-Humana development projects that are spectacular failures. However, the real issue again is the extent of and success of Humana projects is simply not known. Evaluation of projects is an essential part of development and without it there is no way to gauge the effect of projects. Although Humana does issue reports on the achievements that have been met it is not clear how well these stand up to fact-checking by third parties. For example, a member of another international development group working in the same town in Nicaragua reports that local officials did not know about the projects that were reputed to have been accomplished.

Still when volunteers are highly motivated and determined to do good they can often have a good experience and help people. For example, a volunteer in Zimbabwe notes that his desire to work with people gave him the ability to continue.

I stuck it out because I was there for a reason, one that goes beyond the corruption, and I wouldn't trade my experience for anything.

This, however, reflects more on the high quality of the individual volunteers who are able to accomplish things with little support from the TG or other associated TG organizations. As one IICD-MA volunteer in Nicaragua notes

I lived there. I have video, pictures, proof that these projects actually happened. I don't consider myself a tvind volunteer because i had little to no contact with tvind people and for about 1/2 of the time i was there, we basically fended for ourselves without a project leader and without any supervision. a lot of us, despite our disenchantment with the organization and our central america coordinator, worked really hard and accomplished a lot.

A member of an IICD-MA travel group echoes this:

Many members of our group had rewarding personal and educational experiences, but this occurred in spite of the Institute's mishandling of the program.

Summary

Again the experience with a TG school during the international program is widely divergent. A combination of the local project leader, the situation in which one goes, the organizational and helpfulness of TG members and the ability and attitude of the volunteer all combine to create your experience. Again...

...it is NOT simply the attitude of the volunteers and their willingness to work hard at the individual level that determines a project's success.

It certainly helps but any number of factors can conspire against this.

A related issue is that there is no objective assessment of the programs that are implemented. Historically, Humana and the TG have not connected with other NGOs and generally has an "iffy" reputation among organizations such as the UN, CARE and UNDP to name just a few. No really knows exactly what is going on with these projects because Humana doesn't pass along this information so you can't tell if these projects are working.

In short, it seems that in the end it is more a matter of succeeding despite the association with a TG school that makes the difference and one has to again ask, "What are they providing?"

What the TG Schools Do Provide

After the discussion so far you may be surprised to hear that the TG do provide people with some important aspects. These factors basically boil down to two things (1) Providing people with structure and (2) Creating a travel group. Both of these things are very attractive as one contemplates all the unknowns associated with travel and service in a completely foreign place.

The promise of providing training and placement in exotic locations is HUGE! People without many skills or money are clearly attracted to the idea of fitting into this overall system but often the experience does not turn out as hoped because of the issues associated with Humana and the TG. As a former TG member notes

When I took this contract 12 months ago and agreed to join the TG, I only knew that I was getting a chance to return to Angola. That's all that seemed to matter to me. I forgot to contemplate the idea of living under DAPP ideals. That was my greatest mistake. Today I can still say that I want to continue to work in Angola or elsewhere in Africa. That's not where I have gone wrong. I've chosen the correct vocation and location, but I simply didn't choose the proper organization with which to work

Equally attractive is the promise of working on a project together with a group of bright energetic people from around the world. Striking off on your own seems both risky and lonely and by joining one of these schools you get ready made traveling companions. As a former IICD-MI notes

Why did I stay? Well, that's a long story. I wanted to go with a group. I didn't feel confident enough to go on my own. I kept hoping things would change, that at least I would have time to really learn Hindi. I did have the time and space to prepare myself. I read books about development work, about other people's experiences in the field...I became involved with a few people and felt loyal to them. I wanted to see what would happen to some of the young people during their time in India, if they would grow and mature a little. Given what I know now, I'm really, really sorry I didn't leave after the first month.

However, I hope I have convinced you that along with these two good things come a whole set of problems, questionable training and projects and a lot of potential head and heartache. Now before you start getting depressed about not being able to do what you want let me show you that you can actually have a similar travel and volunteer experience on your own.

Alternatives and doing it yourself (or with friends)

This is the positive up-beat section of this website. First point,

The TG schools are not your own avenue for international travel and service!!

Feel better? Good. :) In addition to a number of well-known programs such as the Peace Corps (<http://www.peacecorps.gov/>) there are any number of well structured programs around. You should probably check out Volunteer International (<http://www.volunteerinternational.org/>) or Working Abroad (<http://www.workingabroad.com/>) who try and help people like yourself who want to volunteer abroad.

In addition I want to show how you can raise the necessary funds, attend language classes, volunteer, travel on your own for the same amount of money/time that you have to devote to at TG school. This section is particularly targeted to people who feel that they can't do an international travel period with the kind of structure offered by the TG schools. A common sentiment is:

Don't the Tvind overseas volunteering programs seem to fill a gap in the market? If you want to go to a developing nation and have a real chance to use your own initiative to work with indigenous innovators, educators and campaigners then the you really have few options. If you're really resourceful you could travel to your country of choice, meet up with a local NGO and make yourself invaluable to them. Not everyone can do this.

Excuse my language, but this is complete bullshit!! You can and I'll show you how. I'm going to use the example of a trip to Guatemala, both because of the recent implosion of the IICD-MI Guatemala trip and because it is one with which I am personally familiar. However, the same basic system applies no matter where you want to go.

Step One – Determining the trip length

To make things interesting I've devised a hypothetical stay of ten months (four more than the TG schools) to Guatemala. I've also prepared a spreadsheet that you can use yourself to change time and activities and estimate costs. This trip includes

- 4 months of preparation in which you raise the money for the trip and read up on the culture and history of Guatemala;
- 3 months of intensive language study in Guatemala (5 hours a day one on one with an instructor);
- 5 months of volunteering in Guatemala; and

- 1 month of travel around Guatemala.

It covers the same 13 month time period as a TG program but puts you in Guatemala for 9 months rather than 6, provides valuable and intense language training and best of all puts you in charge.

Step Two – Determining the costs

The costs for this trip outlined below are rough estimates but you can use the spreadsheet I provide to figure out your own schedule and costs. The estimates in terms of costs are fairly generous. If you wanted to make a more comparable experience to a TG program you could drop down the cost down another one to two thousand dollars but this would involve very few luxury items, just eating beans, rice and tortilla and living in bare bone conditions.

Program Aspect	Cost
GETTING THERE	
Roundtrip Airfare to Guatemala City	600
Visa/vaccinations/health insurance	450
Misc. costs from airport to Antigua/Xela	100
STUDY	
12 weeks of Spanish language training*	1440
VOLUNTEERING	
20 weeks volunteer service*	1000
SEEING THE SIGHTS	
7 weeks travel	1575
MISC	
phone/luxuries/basic supplies	1365
TOTAL	6530

* includes room and board

In this trip you would attend a Spanish language school (one I attended and really liked) called Educacion para Todos (<http://www.xelapages.com/paratodos/>) located in Quetzaltenango (Xela) in the highlands of Guatemala. It's in the center of the indigenous part of the country, somewhat off the beaten track and very affordable. But there are lots of language schools in Guatemala (Antigua and Xela) although many tend to be more touristy and expensive. The learning potential offered by these schools are amazing. You spend five hours a day, one on one with a teacher and stay with a host family and it also only costs \$120 a week. An added side benefit is that you know that your money is going directly to people in Guatemala.

Another big advantage is that Educacion para Todos offers a Volunteer center to its students which can help you get a volunteer program up and going. (<http://www.xelapages.com/paratodos/vol.html>) At one time they even provided people the opportunity to study indigenous languages and live with families in highland villages (I'm not sure if this is still the case).

During the course of 12 weeks of language study it would be relatively easy to find an interesting project upon which to work. Remember the self-reliant ethic of the TG schools. It's the same here. Once you get comfortable in Guatemala you will find that there are many many many opportunities for someone who wants to volunteer.

As an added bonus this plan gives you a full seven weeks to travel around Guatemala (or the rest of Central America) and visit Mayan ruins, the beach, and explore village life off the beaten track.

Step Three - Earning the Money

Great you say but I don't have \$6500. Yes but you can get it. The spreadsheet also has ways of calculating you earnings from a job and your living expenses.

I'm not saying that working for four months at a job you dislike, spending as little money as possible and maybe even living with your parents is going to be fun but in the words of the TG, It will provide you with valuable life experience. You can try to compress the time it takes by working multiple jobs.

Stick it out secure in the knowledge that you are working towards a goal and entertain yourself by reading up on your target country with books from the public library. You can live cheaply and have fun. It just takes dedication and it is what you would be doing at a TG school anyway...but you don't have to fundraise. :)

Or you can take the \$3300 you were going to pay a TG school and head out today for an abridged four to six month trip.

Step Four – Preparing for the trip

Going abroad (particularly if it is your first time) can be a daunting experience but don't let that stop you. A good travel companion can be a big help, particularly if don't want to go alone. Think about friends and acquaintances who might be interested and talk about it...you'd be surprised how many people would be into this.

In addition, get a copy of the Lonely Planet Guidebook for Guatemala (or whichever country you are going to). Great resource for background information on visas, immunizations, how to travel cheaply, etc. You can also check out the LP Guatemala page (http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/central_america/guatemala/).

The Lonely Planet also has a newsgroup devoted to people traveling in Latin America (other groups for other regions are also there) and is a great source for getting

opinions/advice from recent and current travelers.
(<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com/thorn/topics.pl?Cat=&Start=cam>)

Step Five - Heading Out

Here's some final advice when you are about to leave for your trip. Arriving in a foreign country can be intimidating. You're tired after a long flight, you don't speak the language, and you are in unfamiliar surroundings. My first priority is always getting away from the airport (and the hoard of taxi drivers, people trying to get you to stay in their hotel, etc.) as soon as possible. The best way to do this is to be as familiar as possible with where you want to go. Luckily the Internet is a great tool for getting information about places to stay, bus schedules.

For Guatemala City I highly recommend that you leave Guatemala City as soon as possible. Its big, dirty and intimidating for a new arrival. Once you are in country for awhile and have a better command of Spanish you can return if you wish. However, its easy to get out of Guatemala City. A good option is to take a shuttle to Antigua (about 45 minutes away). There are lots of options but one suggestion is to check out the schedule at the following website (<http://www.guatemalainfo.com/trans.htm>) Or if you want to head to Xela you can consult the bus schedule here (<http://www.xelapages.com/trans.htm>)

In general, I recommend budgeting extra money for the first day that includes things like a taxi from the airport to the Xela bus station, or a reservation at a more expensive hotel your first night. It will just help you get used to your new surroundings. The last thing I want to do when I first arrive at a strange place is try and figure out the public transportation system with a huge backpack in order to save a few bucks.

Last thing...have a blast!

Conclusion

I expect the overview of the TG programs to ring bells with the majority of former TG volunteers although I doubt people would be in total agreement. There are certainly people like the following who state perfect satisfaction with the preparation period.

I am a former volunteer with IICD-MA. I had a solid preparation period and an eye-opening experience abroad- not about TVID, but about the nation that I was working in, the people that I was working for, and global development issues- just what I wanted to learn about.

What is unclear is how representative the opinion above is and how many people in the program drop the program during this period. I think it is reasonable to estimate that between 20 percent to 25 percent of all participants do not complete the preparation period and that another 10 to 15 percent do not finish the international period with the groups but this is a rough estimate. I'd like to provide better figures but there is no data or records available on this (See FAQ). Still this means that for every person that quits a program there is another who remains with it.

Although everyone's experience and motivations are different I want to emphasize that,...

...Stopping your involvement with a TG program is not a personal failing.

Too often one hears the following type of attitude from people who continue with the program or who are part of the TG:

Im very saddened to read that some people feel they had a bad experience at these schools or projects, but it makes me wonder is this just your way of not feeling as though you have just given up ,to write these awful stories ,is it a way to make yourself feel better about quitting something that you found too hard, it is so easy to blame someone else.

This is not for everyone, you have to be able to organise your own time, work hard, & generally make it a productive & good time for yourself, no one will baby you here, for the simple reason when you get to africa, you are not going to be a student you are going to be a developement instructor...I feel the people who write to tvind alert, have had a bad experience because they havnt done the above mentioned things & have felt unproductive & frustrated as of course you would...Its like when you have a job & you are very bad at it or a bit lazy & you know you are going to be fired, so you quit before they can fire you (no one is kicked out of a program)...Its not yourself that you blame is it, no! you go around all your friends & family saying how bad your boss was & what a crap

job it was etc. Its human nature to want to point the fingure at anyone but yourself.

It's a common reaction of many people (myself included) to fall into the trap of rationalizing away systemic problems within these schools as the personal failings of individuals including themselves. As a former IICD-MI volunteer notes:

And to be completely honest I had decided that this organization was NOT for everyone.. and the only reason these girls had left was because this organization was NOT for them, and perhaps volunteering wasn't for them at all. I had rationalized it to the point that these girls were weak volunteers and that they weren't here to volunteer at all or that they didn't want it enough. As it turns out I was wrong and that they were just more intelligent and had stronger morals and ethics than I did.

Remember, your preparation period depends on a number of things including the experience and abilities of the TG person heading the school, the ability of Humana to ensure that you will have a project to work on, the makeup and personalities of your group, larger issues within the TG and of course your own abilities and attitude. Let's be clear.

It is NOT just dependent on you!

Yes individual attitudes are important but there is SO much going on with the TG school that is completely beyond your control.

In the end, I think the most troubling thing for me about the TG schools is the waste of such good intentions and energy. Idealistic volunteers come to programs eager to help, make friends, and see the world. It seems unconscionable that so many of these people experience needless frustrations, pain and disillusionment. As former volunteers note:

I would love it if this organization would change and reach the full potential I think this organization has to do good in this world.

I was shocked, outraged, and cried every night once the true nature of Humana came to light for me...But its been a year and a half now and I have allowed the anger to slip into something more positive for myself. It is not healthy for me to stay angry at Humana. We are all on this planet and in this together.

To be perfectly honest I do really expect these schools to change. However, I hold out the hope that this website can spare some people needless frustration and who knows, maybe if it starts to effect the bottom line of these schools they will actually meet their potential. I'm not holding my breath but you gotta have hope. In the meantime believe

in yourself and your ability to do this on your own (or with friends) and save yourself the hassle and pain of dealing with the Teachers Group.

Later.....

FAQ

Who should read this?

This is primarily aimed at people considering one of the Teachers Group (TG) schools in the United States. These include:

- The **Institute for International Cooperation and Development (IICD-MA)** in Williamstown, MA;
- The **Institute for International Cooperation and Development (IICD-MI)** in Dowagiac, MI; and
- **Campus California Teacher Group (CCTG)** in Etna, CA.

A lot of the discussion here is probably also relevant to TG schools elsewhere.

I'm in a hurry. What's the bottom line?

The bottom line is that for a number of reasons, financial, emotional, organizational, joining a TG school does not make a whole lot of sense. Despite the low cost and requirements for a TG program you don't get much for your time and money from the organization and risk encountering needlessly frustrating situations. The positive parts of a TG program most often come from your fellow volunteers and the people you meet while you're abroad rather than the Teachers Group school.

You can have a similar travel adventure, meet lots of cool and interesting folks and help people in a developing country without subjecting yourself to the TG experience. [See How.](#)

Are you claiming that this site is objective?

No. I doubt whether it's possible to have an objective opinion about these schools so I'll state up front my opinion that you would be better off doing something else with your time and energy than joining a TG school.

That said, you should also recognize that the material and information you get from one of these TG schools is not objective either. They are advertisements geared towards getting you to join one of the schools and like any advertisement/opinion should be treated with skepticism.

I invite people to approach this website with skepticism as well. I think it can stand up to it.

Why should I believe your argument?

I rely upon the stories people have posted at Tvindalert and in some other guestbooks (such as the one that used to be connected to CCTG) to build a composite image of what takes place. I concentrate on factual statements rather than opinions and rely on several sources before making a statement. There is an element of personal judgment in this process but it is an unavoidable part of the methodology. These statements are not limited to people who are upset with the schools but also includes the publicly available comments made by current members of the TG.

All quotations are presented in *italic and bolded text*.

In addition, I use publicly available materials such as tax returns, property records and court proceedings. In large part I do not rely heavily on news stories per se except to extract direct statements of TG members or volunteers. This is not because I believe that these reports are erroneous but because TG members often argue that these reports are tabloid journalism. By drawing from direct reports from volunteer experiences I hope to prevent this webpage from being discounted in this manner.

I also use experiences from various times and places in order to demonstrate that the same issues keep on coming up over time indicating a systemic organizational problem rather than a one-time aberration.

Why aren't you drawing from Teachers Group sites for stories?

Actually I am using TG sites but not for the stories posted there because of my concern that they are more advertising than reflective of the average volunteer's experience. Often the stories posted at the TG websites focus on the people whom volunteers encounter in other countries and the desperate conditions in which they live. My goal is to move past this obvious fact and examine what the TG schools are doing to prepare people to meet the challenge of helping these people.

Ah ha! So, you admit that you are censoring positive material.

Good, you're being skeptical, but I am not ignoring the positive stories. I readily accept the fact that there are people who enjoy their time as a TG volunteer and go on to join the Teachers Group. After all there are hundreds of members of the TG and they all were volunteers at one point. However, I am uncertain of how representative the stories posted on the sites are (it's advertising after all) and think that the free exchange on guestbooks are a better data source.

Can you list specific instances to back your argument?

Yes. That's sorta the whole point of this. Take a look anywhere in this webpage.

But you are only using the stories of relatively few volunteers. Doesn't mean that everyone else has been happy with the programs?

This is an important point but it is wrong to assume that everyone else is satisfied because in truth we really don't know. We don't have the data. Judging simply from the feelings of the posters at the Tvindalert website there is about a 50/50 split between those who like the program and those who disliked it. But this is a crude indicator

There are a wide array of experiences with some people very happy and going on to join the Teachers Group, some who like some aspect and dislike others, others who dislike the prep period but enjoy the travel period, some who like the travel period but give little credit to the TG for this experience and some who are highly dissatisfied. Generally it is the people of either extreme (pro-TG or anti-TG) that are most likely to write at one of the websites making it hard to get a complete picture.

The real problem is the lack of evaluations of these programs. To my knowledge there are no reliable figures on how many people start at the school, how long they continue in the program, at what point they leave or stay. Information provided from direct inquiries to the schools (IICD-MA and IICD-MI) state that between 5 to 15 percent of volunteers drop out while postings at the Tvindalert website report attrition rates of 50 percent or higher. Obviously there is considerable differences in these figures. Also problematic is that there are no formal evaluations conducted on the quality of volunteers experiences.

What can be pieced together from both reports posted at Tvindalert, information posted at TG school sites and personal communications is the following incidents of programs groups with attrition:

- IICD-MI (2002) – Zambia team lost at least 4 members.
- IICD-MI (2002) – Guatemala group project cancel by IICD-MI for lack of funds at the end of the preparation people – many participants dropped out.
- CCTG (2002) – At least three people drop from Mozambique/Zambia program.
- IICD-MA (2001) – A number of students dropped out after a week
- CCTG (2001) – One team (unknown) dropped.
- IICD-MI (2001) – Volunteer in Chipata, Zambia left before completing entire travel period.
- IICD-MA (mid-1990s) – Unknown number of students leave in reaction to “hidden ownership” of facility by the TG
- IICD-MA (mid 1990s) – Report that about 20 percent of people leave during the fundraising period
- IICD-MA (mid-1990s) – 7 out of 12 people leave the groups scheduled to go to Angola or Zimbabwe
- IICD-MA (1990) – Large number of people quit program before completion
- IICD-MA (1988 and 2001) – reports claim that “half of all the people that enter training leave before they are sent on a humanitarian trip”

These reports are clearly incomplete but suggest a fairly substantial attrition rate that is generally not acknowledged by the schools. For example, a listing of ten program participants for the Mozambique/Zambia programs at CCTG continued to feature people well after they had exited the program.

I welcome more first hand reports from people who were in these schools. Also I would be more than happy to conduct the evaluation of the programs for the TG schools or find a third party to do it. It would be relatively simple. Collect the emails of all incoming participants and ask them to fill out short questionnaires every three months or so and we could have a clear picture.

But the drop-out rate from TG schools is comparable to the Peace Corp! It’s just a tough thing to volunteer in the developing world.

According to the press office of the Peace Corp, approximately 25 percent of volunteers do not complete the full two years at their station. (It’s worth mentioning that it was very

easy to track down this figure and many others from the Peace Corp in contrast to getting information from the TG schools.)

However, I don't think that this comparison is valid. First a large number of TG volunteers drop the program while they are still in the US. It's not the difficulty of living in a developing country that makes them leave but issues with the TG schools. Second, PC volunteers spend 24 months in country versus the 6 months commonly spent by TG volunteers. So one would expect the TG to have a lower drop off rate simply because the volunteers are in country for less time.

Why don't you do something POSITIVE with your time rather than tearing down these schools?

I actually believe that I am doing something positive by helping people make informed selections about how they spend their time and money. Also I have outlined alternative ways to study, travel and volunteer internationally.

Is the Teachers Group a cult? Do they engage in brainwashing? Will I be able to leave if I want?

In my opinion the whole cult/brainwashing issue is a bit of a red herring popular among journalists because it sells papers. My main critique is that it makes it too easy for the TG to dodge the real issues and cast Tvindalert and other journalistic reports as hate-inspired disinformation and themselves as victims. In short, if you volunteer at one of these schools you will not be prevented from leaving if you decide.

That said, once people join there are a number of factors that make people reluctant to drop out. As a former IICD-MI volunteer notes

It is easier to ignore the facts while you are there, because you have stability and you don't have to think....It is easier to be on the outside looking in and asking "why doesn't she just LEAVE?" but trust me as someone who just left, it is extremely hard, everything is constantly rationalized to you, and even now I have doubts that I made the right decision to leave. If it weren't for my family's amazing support and love I don't think I would have ever left.

More specifically some of the factors are as follows. First, is the obvious fact that you will forfeit some of the thousands of dollars that you paid for the program. The schools follow strict repayment schedules and the longer you are at a school the less tuition refund you will get. Plus, as the following comment suggests, getting the payment can take many months.

I left IICD MI on Dec16th 2001, I was promised a refund of \$2000.00 us funds, after many ,many phone calls ,emails and promises, and one bounced cheque, I finally received it on May 3rd 2002, so there is hope, anyone waiting for a refund, keep bugging and you may get lucky like I did.

Second, people who join really want to go and if you stop the program you are suddenly faced with uncertain (and perhaps uninteresting prospects). Third, there is a atmosphere cultivated at the TG that those who stop are either lazy, unmotivated or didn't try hard enough. People who join these programs are rarely any of these things and the feeling of being labeled this is a strong motivation to gut it out. Finally, there is the sense of "temporary transition" in which the problems that one faces will be resolved soon. It's a carrot that can keep you going and because the TG schools have packed schedules, lots of things to do and not so much time to reflect on larger issues that these might be systemic to the organization.

Aren't you picking on the Teachers Group? The members of the TG can do whatever they want with their salaries and its none of your business.

Point taken. I actually agree that I do not have the legal right to inspect the finances of these schools outside of the federal tax forms they are required by law to file...

BUT

...I think it is strange that a non-profit development organization is content with simply following the letter of the law. Shouldn't non-profits and educational institutions have higher goals than simply following legal requirements? I think that this is particularly true when a number of reports exist on questionable practices of the schools and police charges of fraud by other parts of the TG.

After all, the TG schools are asking the public and their volunteers to trust that their donations of time and money will be used well.

But the TG is simply trying to stretch every dollar as far as it can go. Wouldn't you?

Yes, but the TG system is structured in such a way that very few TG members are actually involved in running the common economy. This provides little oversight beyond this core group of people and there is ample opportunity for corruption such as documented [here](#). Simple checks and balances seem to be lacking that could ensure that the money is well spent.

I suspect that the average TG member is not involved in deciding how their salary is used. They simply sign it over and trust that it is well spent. My point is that this trust has been abused by the more senior members of the Teachers Group.

The Teachers Group is just misunderstood by the bourgeois mentality that this site represents. Aren't you just afraid of the challenge that the community orientation and selflessness that TG members have dedicated themselves to? Don't you hate the idea that the Teachers Group represents?

Actually, just the contrary. I think that the vision represented by these schools is fantastic! It's what made me volunteer with them. But the reality of these schools does not match the vision which has been twisted into a corrupt parody of itself.

This website exists not because I dislike communal living or because a TG member hurt my feelings. I highly respect the sacrifice and dedication that many TG members make. At the same time I cannot ignore the mis-information, manipulation and corruption that is also tied to this group. It is my sincerest hope that the numerous good people that are part of this organization will reform into a new organization free from the ties of the old and with stronger governance that will prevent a reoccurrence of what has take place.

What's this about selling used clothes and/or plantations in Brazil and Belize?

The Teachers Group is involved in a number of projects around the world that are highly controversial. The TG's position is generally that these projects (some of which are for-profit) provide the resources for development projects. Others have called these a misuse of public funds and non-profit status. I am not going to address it here because my main point is discussing what your experience at one of the schools will be like.

However, these questions bring up important larger issues about the TG program and it is worth checking out the pages at [Tvindalert](#) (and elsewhere) that cover this.

I want to respond to this. How do I do that?

Both negative and positive comments are welcome although flames will be cheerfully ignored. I don't have the means to set up a guestbook so if you want to post your comments publicly, I'd suggest the [Tvindalert](#) guestbook.

I'm particularly eager to hear from people who have volunteered at these schools with their comments/thoughts on this. Feel free to contact me via iicdwatch@hotmail.com. It may take a couple of days to get a response. I can't guarantee however, that I will engage in a discussion if I feel that I've already made my point in the website.

I'm currently enrolled in one of these schools but am beginning to wonder if I should stop. What should I do?

Although this site is geared towards people before they join one of these schools I am well aware that you don't really know what these schools are about before you get into the thick of it. So I'm trying to give the kind of advice that I would have appreciated early on but only you can decide what makes sense for you....

If you are already invested in one of these schools you have to face the fact that you will lose a large portion of your tuition if you leave. However, I think it would be in your best interest particularly early on before you've invested to much time and money.

Chalk it up as a life lesson, dearly paid for and start working on achieving your goals of travel and service. (See here). In the same six months you would have spent in a TG training school you can position yourself for a similar program on your own.

If you are just days away from leaving for the international period and already have the training/fund-raising portion completed then it may make sense to stay with the program. I think that if you have already invested this much time and effort in the program you

might as well experience the portion of it that attracted you in the first place. HOWEVER, I would HIGHLY RECOMMEND that you take a few precautions that will allow you to leave if you have problems with the project or Humana.

1. Be 100 percent prepared mentally, emotionally, and financially to just walk away if you need to. Many people have done just that and have gone on to have deeply rewarding experience without working with Humana or the TG. You'll be in whatever country you were preparing for and could either travel/explore or hook up with a non-Humana non-profit or school. The opportunity is there and the TG is not the only way to go.
2. Keep your passport and your return plane ticket with you at all times so if you do decide you'll be able to leave with a minimum of hassle and argument. Humana will probably argue that it is better to keep passports and tickets safe in a central location (a valid point) but personally I prefer to keep things close. Moneybelts work well.
3. Get the phone number and address of your country's embassy. They can provide some assistance for you if you are really strapped.
4. Bring a couple hundred dollars in cash and a credit card that you can use to get a cash advance. Yes credit cards charge ridiculous rates for this but if you need it, you need it. Keep these with you. This will provide you with the freedom to leave if you want. You may not decide to but its good to have the option.
5. Buy your own personal copy of the Lonely Planet Guide for the country to which you are going. These things are GREAT resources on how to live and travel cheap and you want your own copy that you can take with you if need be.
6. Establish an email account at hotmail and pass it out to all your friends and family. It will be the easiest (and cheapest) way to stay in contact and get their help.
7. Be demanding and pushy with the Humana people. You've contributed over \$10,000 from fees and fundraising to come here and you deserve attention and respect. This is particularly true when it comes to resources for your project.
8. Don't let anyone compromise your security or health. If you think a situation is unhealthy for you then fixing the situation is your number one priority. You don't have to live in luxury but ensuring that you have a safe place to sleep, clean water and food should be the first priority for you. Yes, many people where you are at do not have these things but that will be the case whether you are there or not. It's simply counterproductive and inefficient to spend thousands of dollars to travel thousands of miles simply to get sick and be unable to work.
9. Keep your wits about you, your eyes and ears open and your opinions strong.

I think these precautions will allow you to do the international period and if need be just walk away. ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT YOU CAN JUST WALK AWAY.

Who are you?

I'm a former IICD-MA volunteer who wants to pass on the wisdom (what there is of it) I gained from my and other's experience to people contemplating joining these groups. Although I readily admit that I don't know all the ins and outs of the Teachers Group's schools I think I can give you a good sense of likely issues you will encounter.

I've also worked and traveled in Central America, Africa, Western and Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Southeast Asia and so know something about international travel and development work (although I would not call myself a development expert). I'm currently a professor at a large Midwestern university and prefer to remain anonymous at this time so my words rather than who I am are the focus of this site. Besides maybe the mystery will make this site more alluring. :-). It worked for Homer Simpson.

I'm motivated by a feeling that something that is lacking in all the controversy about the Teachers Group is an assessment of what it is like to be a volunteer with these groups. Tvindalert, in my humble opinion, in addition to being a fantastic resource tends to concentrate on the more sensational aspects of the Teachers Group and sound bites that can sell papers.

The TG schools, again in my humble opinion, do not present an honest depiction of the value of their training, brush aside substantial evidence of serious problems and outright corruption within the organization and incorrectly cast themselves as the victims of right-wing hate groups.

I'm simply trying to cut through the controversy/marketing and say, **“Hey. You really don't get much from these schools and can do exactly what they do on your own** (or even better with a group of friends) and by so doing, have a better chance of having a good experience and really helping people in the developing world.

This site is entirely my personal endeavor, hosted for free at Bravenet and generates no revenues. It's not associated with Tvindalert, IICD, IICD-MI, or CCTG although I do rely on these sites for the materials posted here. Feel free to contact me via iicdwatch@hotmail.com although it may take a few days to get a response. I'm particularly interested in hearing reactions of former TG volunteers and people with first hand experience in these projects.

Good Links

Here are some links to check out.

BBC Report on the Teachers Group and Tvind

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/crossing_continents/newsid_1885000/1885116.stm

A magazine article that provide a good overview and history of IICD in the US.

http://www.tvindalert.org.uk/mission_control.htm

Outline of the Danish government's case on the misuse of funds by the TG

http://www.tvindalert.org.uk/index/Exhibit_C.pdf

Overview of the Teachers Group in the US

<http://www.tvindalert.org.uk/countries/USA/Tvindus.html>

Background on the Teachers Group

http://www.tvindalert.org.uk/teachers_group.htm

Overview of Teachers Group Finances

http://www.tvindalert.org.uk/the_money_machine.htm

Report on the Teachers Group from a former member

http://www.tvindalert.org.uk/Reports/a_report_in_denmark.htm

A complaint filed by participants on an IICD program in 1991

<http://www.tvindalert.org.uk/countries/USA/memorandum.htm>

A third party evaluation of the IICD projects in Nicaragua

<http://www.tvindalert.org.uk/nicaragua.htm>.

Tvindalert's Guestbook

<http://www.tvindalert.org.uk/guestbook.htm>

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