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## Case Study: The Bosnia Project

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Anna Mahalak  
**Case Study: The Bosnia Project**

**Abstract**

The purpose of this report is to critically examine William & Mary's longest running student-run service trip. The Bosnia Project has sent William & Mary students to Bosnia each summer since 1998 to run a summer camp focused on teaching English with a partner Bosnian non-governmental organization (NGO). This collaboration with NGOs in Bosnia has changed and grown over time to adapt to the needs of Bosnian youth and take advantage of new technology. As the Bosnia Project enters its fourteenth summer, the following history and context for the project, as well as an exploration of results and opportunities for growth, provides a model for other student organizations as they reflect on the past in preparation for the future.

*Author Biography:*

Anna Mahalak is a student at the College of William & Mary graduating May 2012. Anna traveled to Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina in 2010 with the Bosnia Project and stayed involved with the project as a mentor to future volunteers. She hopes to return to the Balkans in the future through a Fulbright ETA and continue to foster international service in the region through the Bosnia Project and other collaborations.

*Faculty Mentors:*

Drew Stelljes, Director of Community Engagement, College of William & Mary

Paula Pickering, Associate Professor of Government, College of William & Mary

## **Explanation of initiative's context and background**

The Bosnia Project is a long-running collaboration between the College of William and Mary and non-governmental organizations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Not only is the Bosnia Project the oldest international service trip at the College, it also provides the longest in-country field service experience. While most service trips have a field experience of about two weeks, Bosnia Project volunteers typically engage in at least four weeks of direct service. Additionally, this functions as a unique immersion experience for William & Mary students in a region where there are few opportunities to study abroad. Its mission is to bring together William & Mary and Bosnian students to foster cross-cultural understanding and leadership, as well as work towards positive change for the youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Participants are selected each year through an interview and application process, organized by Bosnia Project alumni.

The project was initiated in 1998 by a visiting scholar from the former Yugoslavia and led to a partnership with Sezam, an organization doing therapeutic work with children who experienced emotional trauma during the 1992-95 war. The first William & Mary team traveled to Zenica, Bosnia in summer 1998 to run a summer camp for children through Sezam. In teaching English language skills, students were able to provide resources to a the population of a small, economically struggling city, support positive relations among the Bosnian youth who attended the camp, and give youth the opportunity to benefit from active, student-centered teaching approaches. By promoting non-violent communication skills in the classroom, William & Mary students were setting an example for productive communication that has the potential to aid in Bosnia's social and political transformation since the war.

As the priorities and resources of Sezam changed, past Bosnia Project participants and faculty advisor Paula Pickering recognized the need to establish a new partnership. They began

to collaborate with Creativus, a Sarajevo-based organization developed by one of the original founders of Sezam. The Bosnia Project now sends five students every summer through the Bosnia Project to partner with Creativus in hosting an English and Film Summer Camp. William & Mary students are now team-teaching alongside Bosnian university students who are studying English language education. Bosnians and the William & Mary volunteers collaborate to create lesson plans for the summer camps.

### **Elaboration of stakeholders and their histories (the leaders)**

The primary stakeholders in the William & Mary Bosnia Project are Creativus, Bosnian university students, Bosnian youth, and William & Mary students. Each stakeholder benefits from the project in a different way, and each is able to contribute to create a cohesive relationship and ensure the project's success.

Currently, Creativus's main project is providing year-round English classes for preschool-aged children. The partnership with the Bosnia Project represents Creativus's initiative to expand its name and influence in the community for social good. The summer camp run by the William & Mary and Bosnian university students, in collaboration with Creativus, is for students ages 8-12.

Bosnian university students serve as co-teachers in partnership with William & Mary students. They are students at the University of Sarajevo, and most plan to become English teachers in the country. The Bosnia Project provides a unique experience for them to gain experience working with children, which they would not normally extensively obtain from their university program. The partnership between Bosnian and William & Mary students is beneficial academically, professionally, and socially for all involved.

Bosnian youth benefit from gaining English instruction from native English speakers. While English education is present in some Bosnian schools, the extent and quality to which it is taught varies. Additionally, the Bosnia Project fosters teamwork skills and creativity in a classroom setting, which is not typically found in the Bosnian education system. The unique opportunity to “play” with English using creative media skills benefits Bosnian youth in both their education and social development. Their participation has long-term social and potentially political effects for the entire country, as their videos made through the camps provide an insight into a country that has long been regarded as a war zone. The Bosnian students are able to present their country from a different perspective, giving a more realistic picture of daily life in a country that is growing and recovering but still carries the scars of the conflict .

Bosnia Project alumni have been key contributors to the Project’s longevity and success. As alumni, they want to see the Project continue to grow and succeed. Many alumni remain involved in NGO work or specifically in the region of the Balkans. They continue to contribute to the Project by maintaining their relationships in Bosnia and continuing to build partnerships with NGO’s domestically and abroad that share the Bosnia Project’s mission to create a better future for youth through education. Professor Pickering, who teaches the course as an overload to her typical teaching schedule, is gratified by seeing the Bosnia Project students expand their leadership skills and make a positive, concrete contribution to a community she has been deeply involved in research for 20 years.

### **Discussion of initiative’s development and implementation (the project/challenge)**

The Bosnia Project continues to adapt to the needs of the community with which it works by responding to the challenges facing Bosnian youth in the post-war era and addressing the need for English education in a creative outlet. The biggest change to the project was made in

2009, when it became clear that the priorities of the original NGO partner Sezam were changing in response to limited resources, and they could no longer provide the necessary support for the summer program. That year, instead of sending a team of teachers to Bosnia, William and Mary used seed grant money to send one student to meet extensively with Sezam to attempt to solve the issues, in addition to exploring options for collaboration with other organizations. It was decided that the project would maintain collaboration with Sezam in addition to piloting a new branch of the project in Sarajevo with Creativus. In 2010, students worked with both Sezam in Zenica and Creativus in Sarajevo. After careful consideration and consultation, Bosnia Project participants have decided to shift the focus of the service program to Creativus in Sarajevo, which was viewed as the more productive and sustainable partnership.

The Project's new direction in 2010 was a challenge, as the Bosnia Project incorporated a new creative media component into the curriculum. Through the newly developed English and Film Camp, William and Mary students facilitated the use of flip cameras as the Bosnian students created videos that showed a side of Bosnia rarely seen in the U.S. Challenges always arise when working across thousands of miles and a cultural language barrier. Communication technology can distort messages, and the language barrier can create misunderstanding across these mediums. The partnership has since grown and continued to build this trust and understanding in the relationship with Creativus. Though the challenges have been difficult, the project's new directions adds important value; there are few opportunities for youth to engage creatively with their peers, not to mention with foreigners, in an open and fun atmosphere. The short films are concrete creative products in which the students can take great pride.

### **Summary of initiative's results and limitations (the solution)**

In 2010, the team taught English in a fun, no-cost setting to 250 Bosnian students. Since shifting its focus to Sarajevo, the Bosnia Project has been able to work with over children through its English and Film Camp activities as well as working at the Creativus preschool. In its first summer making films, the Bosnia Project produced three student films and two general films that detailed the Bosnia Project and the “behind-the-scenes.” In its second media summer, the Bosnia Project created eight short films. These films are posted on Youtube to be accessed by the Bosnian students, their families, and those in the William & Mary community.

Much of the Bosnia Project’s work from its early years with Sezam is seen through informal relationships and data. Some of the students who benefited from those summer camps have stayed in touch with the William & Mary students and one even became a co-teacher for one of the summer camps. The Bosnia Project has served as a resource for the Bosnian university students who serve as co-teachers. Many of these participants now have jobs as teachers and stay in contact with their William & Mary counterparts for resources regarding American education such as university curriculum.

### **Analysis of factors contributing to outcomes (the strategy)**

Bosnia Project students take a two-credit course taught by Dr. Paula Pickering. She works with Bosnia Project alumni to develop the topics of Bosnian history, politics, culture and language, teaching English, and non-violent conflict resolution in Bosnia, and the service learning process in general. Significantly, the course also discusses why international efforts to rebuild Bosnia have both positively and negatively shaped reconstruction and reconciliation. Students create lesson plans, complete weekly readings, and keep a journal during their stay in Bosnia in order to help them engage in the reflective process of service learning. The Bosnia Project’s curricular component is essential to the process of service-learning. It provides current



team members with the chance to acquire an objective perspective of a highly contested history, practice language skills, learn about classroom management, and bond as a team.

A key component in determining the Project's outcomes is the work of Bosnian partners and BP alumni. Bosnian partners help solicit host families, advertise the summer camp, and gather university students to co-teach. This truly creates a partnership, in which the project could not survive without Americans or Bosnians. This equality of ownership leads to success.

This student led project facilitates and relies upon student leadership development. The William & Mary students are from all different class years. Seniors are allowed to participate, unlike most service trips, because of the maturity and commitment they bring to the project even after they are no longer on campus. Students gain skills by planning the trip, working as a team to create lesson plans, and recruiting the next year's team through on campus public relations. They also serve as reflective practitioners, completing weekly reflection activities while in Bosnia and conducting self-led reflection at the end of the service project. Additionally, students then serve as mentors back on campus, acting as teaching assistants in the Bosnia Project class and returning to speak in the spring semester course to better prepare the future team.

### **Reflection on lessons learned and recommendations for the future (lessons learned and questions for discussion)**

Each year, the Bosnia Project learns new lessons in cross-cultural communication and expectations. Negotiating the partnership with the NGO's, deciding on a budget, and ensuring host family accommodations is often difficult because of distance and differing cultural expectations for communication. Since moving the project to Sarajevo, the team has learned to facilitate more direct communication with co-teachers beforehand, through Skype and emails. Additionally, William & Mary students have acquired a clearer idea of what type of lesson plans

must be prepared prior to their arrival in Bosnia and what must be adapted when lessons begin. Last year the Bosnia Project initiated a several-day long orientation program that helped students and their Bosnian partner address the issue of expectations. This coming summer, we have decided to expand the orientation session several days to include observation of the pre-school classes and a preparatory, collaborative lesson planning. Putting expectations for volunteers and for the community partner in writing is part of this communication and preparation.

In the future, the Bosnia Project should take advantage of technology to facilitate communication with Bosnian partners throughout the year leading up to the summer visit. This would provide connection between the Bosnian university students and William & Mary students. This would also help prevent any communication lapses between the two sides of the Project. Additionally, the Bosnia Project (which occurs typically mid-June to late July) should consider altering the timeline of the Project in partnership with Creativus to align with the Sarajevo Film Festival, which provides the opportunity to connect the English and Film Camp with a nationally recognized film festival by incorporating student films made at the camp.

One limitation of the Bosnia Project is the fact that new students participate each summer. This is helpful for multiple reasons, including bringing new ideas to the table, but limits the relationship building that can occur to plan the next year's trip. The Bosnia Project relies heavily on alumni support for its sustainability and successful partnership with Creativus. The project should continue to explore ways of institutionalizing this communication factor into its network and structure.

An additional challenge is that financial limitations constrain the number of volunteers William & Mary can send each year, as well as how many Bosnian co-teachers can be supported with a stipend. There are fewer thriving NGO's in more rural Bosnia, which limits the Bosnia

Project to working in the capital of Sarajevo where there is often less economic diversity among students. Finding a dependable partner with which the Project had a strong relationship with already was the first priority in the shifting project. Despite these limitations, the Bosnia Project seeks opportunities to continue to grow and thrive in its purpose.

Another challenge is trying to judge more accurately the impact of the Bosnia Project on both its Bosnian and American participants. Keeping records on students and co-teachers who participate in the Project will allow accuracy in gauging this success. Consistent evaluation on how the project contributes to Creativus and its community outreach is needed.