Voluntourism—volunteer tourism—is a fast-growing form of tourism where travellers participate in some form of charitable work overseas, most often in third-world countries. Estimates of the volunteer tourism industry vary widely, however one study shows that as many as 10 million volunteers from primarily Western nations are spending up to $2 billion on such programs a year. There is uncertainty as to whether it is a multi-million or multi-billion dollar industry however the fact remains that voluntourism is on the rise.

The lack of comprehensive data on the exact size of the industry, its growth rate, or how the benefits of this new industry are distributed between voluntourists and local residents is evidence of the lack of regulation in this sector. Because there is little or no regulation of economic and social activity of participants and providers, it is difficult to hold volunteer-based travel companies accountable for their work. Many investigations have shown that numerous volunteer travel programs harm their respective communities more than they help, as they often send unskilled volunteers to work on poorly developed projects. College students are prime targets for corporate voluntourism companies who exploit their noble intentions for large profits. Whatever the benefits and costs of voluntourism, it is enough to warrant extreme caution if any harm results from this contemporary form of “foreign aid.”

Africa (specifically Sub-Saharan Africa) is the second most searched region for volunteer travel. Motivated to remedy the problem of voluntourism, I created Star Service & Study Abroad along with my UMass colleague, Brittni Howard. SSSA works in partnership with a local Ghanaian organization, The Cheerful Hearts Foundation. Our students will work on one of our partner’s three main projects: public health, education, anti-child labor trafficking. While we facilitate classes on history, privilege, power, politics to make them aware of the larger socio-political context behind the projects they are working as well as

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1 “Boom in ‘voluntourism’ sparks concerns over whether the industry is doing good,” last modified Jun 29, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-travel-volunteers-charities-idUSKCN0P91AX20150629
their own positionality in this setting. A very important provision that we took to minimize harm to the community that we will be serving is making sure that our students will work under a Ghanaian professional and will not have positions that require them to work closely with trafficked children. Our bimodal approach gives students experience in ethical community building abroad. Our intention is to make a generation of college students that can be culturally competent and assets to the communities they serve, whether at home or overseas.