Part I: Preliminary Information

Title:
The Picture of Beauty: Understanding relationships between skin tone and self-esteem using documentary photography to promote global women’s empowerment

Names:

Abstract:
This project will be an interdisciplinary endeavor in the fields of Human Service Studies and Communications, and will be conducted in an international context under the broad theme of women’s empowerment. It will explore the relationship between skin tone and the self-esteem of adolescent girls in the Philippines, a country where a skin-whitening phenomenon propels sentiments that only fair skin is beautiful. An academic study will be complemented by the use of PhotoVoice methodology in which cameras are put in the hands of participants so that they can express their own concepts of beauty through photography. This project will include travel to the Philippines, Guatemala, and New Zealand for research, volunteerism, and academic study, respectively. Opportunities for documentary photography will be sought throughout the project and will result in various photo-documentaries for social change. Finally, there will be occasions for presentation of the completed research and documentary efforts.
Background Statement:

It’s another stifling and humid day in the barangay of Aninuan. On the beach, I sit in shade with Jenny, the 11-year-old daughter the Stairway Foundation’s cook. We each drink a cold Coke from a straw poked through a napkin that keeps the flies out of the bottle. Jenny is shy, but between her English and my primitive Tagalog, we have become good friends over the past few weeks that I have spent in the Philippines. We start talking about our families and she asks me if I look like my sisters. I tell her yes and ask her if she and her sister look alike. “No, my sister is more beautiful,” says Jenny as she takes her light brown hand and points to my white one. “She has white skin.” Confused and troubled by the response of one of the loveliest girls I have ever seen, I ask her if she knows that girls in the United States want skin that is her color. Jenny’s mouth drops in profound shock when I explain to her the concept of tanning beds and spray tans.

Aninuan Beach, the Philippines, July 2009

I have two passions in life: art and people. I express the former through photography. The latter I seek to pursue through volunteerism, especially internationally. The Lumen prize would allow me to synthesize my passions in an experience that will foster my growth as a scholar, photographer, and global citizen.

As a Human Services and Communications double major, I have taken courses ranging from International Human Services and the Human Services Practicum to Digital Media and Photography as a Social Critique. They have helped me understand the forces that influence poverty, illiteracy, and violations of human rights, and the importance of women’s empowerment to solving these world issues. They have inspired me to question how I can use photography and communications to advocate for positive social change.

In conjunction with my academic work, my experiences outside of Elon have developed my interests and inform my Lumen proposal. I am particularly interested in working with adolescents. Much of my volunteer work has been with OASIS (Outdoor Action for Social and Intrapersonal Strength), a non-profit retreat program that I co-founded for at-risk middle school students in Durham to participate in outdoor activities in order to build character, teamwork, and self-esteem. This experience has made me aware
of the plight of children globally and inspired me to seek international opportunities for service with them.

As the 2009 Ward Family Learning in Action Award and Bruns Endowment for Service-Learning Award recipient, I spent two months volunteering in the Philippines with the Stairway Foundation, an advocacy and rehabilitation center for street children, where I photographed for the organization and researched sex trafficking in minors. This experience, which I considered a basis for developing my research agenda, led me to a country where city billboards advertise skin-whitening lotions and girls cake baby powder on their faces. The image of Jenny’s face full of wonder, and even a hint of pride, that people thought her tan skin is beautiful, was burned into my mind, and I realized the severity of this skin-whitening phenomenon and its potential effects on girls’ self-esteem and empowerment. It is this image that propels my application, the point where my interests intersect.

After Elon, I will continue to pursue helping people through communications. I will attend graduate school and volunteer in the Peace Corps, using photography to document my encounters. I believe I have an aptitude for a career in non-profit work and see myself using documentary photography for advocacy and empowerment.

Part II: Narrative

Focus:

The primary focus for this proposal is international human services with a particular interest in the global empowerment of young women and how to advocate for social change using photography as a social commentary. I aim to expand my understanding of
adolescent girls in selected developing countries, particularly Guatemala and the Philippines, through experiences in research, volunteer work, and documentary photography. These opportunities will deepen my knowledge of issues facing adolescent girls in developing countries and in how to use both my human services and communications skills to be an effective advocate for social change.

The remainder of my narrative will focus on a critical issue among the broad scope of women’s empowerment: self esteem as it relates to skin tone. I will conduct independent research on this issue in the Philippines, examining the phenomenon of skin whitening and the desire to have lighter skin in Filipina girls. I hope to gain a nuanced understanding of the implications that it may have on their self-esteem.

Women’s empowerment refers to increasing the strength of women spiritually, socially, economically, and otherwise (United Nations POPIN). Unfortunately, women of all ages around the world struggle with low self-esteem and body image, a significant hindrance to their empowerment. Particularly vulnerable to poor self-esteem are adolescent girls of color who, because they have been exposed to a world that tells them that white is beautiful, are unhappy with their skin color. The cosmetic industry has capitalized on such a narrow portrayal of beauty in the media around the world, especially in Asia. In 2005 alone, 62 new skin-whitening products were introduced in the region (Parameswaran, & Cardoza, 2007). Asians spend over $18 billion dollars on skin-whitening treatments every year and nearly half of women in the Philippines use whitening products (Martin, 2009). Marketing campaigns for skin whitening products link fair skin to notions of happiness, achievement, and status. These treatments, ranging from over the counter creams to extreme surgery, produce adverse side effects, as whitening products contain
bleach, mercury, and hydroquinone, all of which can cause damage to the body (del Giudice, & Yves, 2002). The potentially equally harmful effects that the skin-whitening phenomenon has on adolescent girls’ self-esteem in the Philippines remains unexplored.

Filipinos, through centuries of intermarriage, have become a unique blend of Malay, Chinese, Indonesian, Spanish, Negrito, and American (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2009); therefore they vary in complexion, ranging from *maputi* (light) to *kayumanggi* (dark). Colonial powers Spain and the United States each controlled the Philippines and greatly influenced the Filipino concept of ideal skin tone and beauty. The Philippines was also occupied by the Japanese for a period of time (1942-1944), another culture that values light skin.

Culturally, the United States and Japan continue to have a strong influence in the Philippines due to business and popular media, and continue to expose Filipinos to their white ideals of beauty. These media messages seep into the subconscious of the public and manifest in a detrimental cultural perception that white, exclusively, shows beauty and more importantly, status (Easton, 1998). Individuals believe that others are more strongly affected by media portrayals than they themselves are (Milkie, 1999). Therefore, adolescents are likely to believe that others hold them to this white standard and in effect hold themselves to the same standard.

In many countries, including the Philippines, white skin continues to be associated with social privileges, including better job and marital prospects (Dadzie and Petit, 2009). For women in the Philippines, marriage is seen as a requirement and key to happiness and self-esteem. Filipina women agree that beautiful women are more valued by men. Believing that they are not desirable due to their skin tone, coupled with the fear of social rejection if
they are never married, can negatively impact their life satisfaction and wellbeing, especially among younger women (Etcoff et. al, 2004).

Despite the vulnerability of Filipinas to poor self-esteem related to skin tone, there has not been research on the impact of the phenomenon on their lives. Research on self-esteem has demonstrated that girls’ perceptions of their physical attractiveness negatively influence not only their self-esteem but also their behavioral choices relating to substance abuse, sexual behavior, and accepting the role of scapegoat in order to fit in with a group (Phillips, 2004). Most of the studies done on self-esteem and skin tone have been in the African American population. Research has found that those with darker complexions are more likely than those with lighter complexions to have negative self-esteem (Thompson, & Keith, 2001). Research also states that darker skinned people are taught that a lighter complexion is preferred and they believe that it is more attractive to the opposite sex (Etcoff et. al, 2004). The lack of scholarship on the issue in Asia is surprising because it is the hub of the skin-whitening phenomenon, and the Philippines is a forerunner in consumption of whitening products. Research shows that South Asian-Canadian females were found to desire lighter skin than they possessed and had lower body satisfaction compared with European-Canadian females (Sahay, & Piran, 1997). Through my research, I anticipate finding similar desires to be lighter and will explore the impact of this construct of beauty on the lives of Filipina adolescent girls.

Throughout my research in the Philippines, I will be implementing PhotoVoice, a participatory action research method that provides people with cameras and so that they can document their daily experiences (Wang, 1999). This technique enables participants to portray their own lives through photography rather than having a photographer speak for
them. Not only does the PhotoVoice method give the marginalized and objectified a voice, it also focuses on improving the life and health of communities in which it is implemented (Wang, 1999). I will be able to analyze and use these photos as qualitative data, as well as use them for advocacy documentary purposes.

**Proposed experiences**

I will use the resources provided by the Lumen Prize for a variety of experiences that synthesize my two fields of study and allow for an exchange of knowledge between myself, people I encounter abroad, and the Elon community. I will begin this summer volunteering with teenage girls in Lake Atitlan, Guatemala while further developing my Spanish language skills and photographing for a photo-documentary.

In the fall of 2010, I will become trained in PhotoVoice for use in the Philippines. PhotoVoice projects aim to bring positive social change through promoting self-development, advocacy, and a higher standard of living for the participants. I will attend the Maine Media Documentary Photography & Social Change Workshop where I will learn about creating media for social change. I will also write the proposal for my Fellows research project on adolescent girls in the Philippines and obtain IRB approval.

During winter term of 2011 I will collect data for Fellows research by completing a 6-week study of adolescent girls in Oriental Mindoro, in the Philippines, through in-depth interviews and PhotoVoice. From there, I will study abroad in New Zealand in the spring of 2011 where I plan to continue both human services and communications studies as well as to photograph and volunteer with indigenous women in the Maori community. During this semester I will evaluate my research status: if I need to collect more data I will return to
the Philippines for an additional two weeks in the beginning of summer 2011. I will also apply to Elon’s Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE) in 2011 to analyze my data and prepare my research report for publication.

During fall of 2011 I will attend a social science conference focusing on women’s empowerment. I will also complete my human services internship and prepare my research presentations. I will submit my photo-documentaries to national documentary festivals such as SilverDocs. During the spring of 2012, I will conclude my research process by presenting at SURF.

Throughout my experiences, especially abroad, I plan on creating short, monthly photo-essays as well as keeping an online blog to share with the Elon community what I am learning. To me, this is the essence of being a Lumen scholar: not only to go into the world and impact the lives of others, but to allow my life to be impacted by those I meet and the experiences I have and to shed light on critical issues to inform those who are back at home such that they might, in some way, also be inspired.

**Proposed Products**

Resulting from my experiences I plan to have a diverse array of products that highlight the work I will have completed. First, I will write a research paper on my findings in the Philippines and submit it for publication in an academic journal. Second, I will present my research to the Elon community at the Student Undergraduate Research Forum. In addition, I will have at least two photo documentaries ready for presentation. I will have multiple photo essays that I will have shared with the Elon community during my time as a Lumen scholar as well as a personal reflection blog.
Part III: Feasibility

Feasibility Statement:

The most important skills for the completion of this project are an understanding of Filipino culture and a relationship with the community in which I will be doing my research. I have both of these because of the time I spent in the Philippines this past summer. I have a reliable community partner in the Stairway Foundation, complete with psychologists, social workers, and teachers, and an open invitation to stay with them at their facility again while I research in the surrounding area. While in the barangay (village) last summer, I visited the school, met with the principal, and attended church every Sunday, which allowed me to form bonds with community members.

Equally important is the ability to communicate with the population. In the Philippines, they speak both English and Tagalog. While in the Philippines this past summer, I was able to pick up a bit of Tagalog, though not enough to conduct interviews or surveys without a translator. Thankfully, I have an interpreter from Stairway Foundation who is able to translate for me during interviews as well as translate written surveys into Tagalog. I plan to compensate him for his time. Over the next year, I will also use Rosetta Stone to continue to learn more Tagalog, a language with the same syntax, conjugations, and many similar words as my second language, Spanish. This summer I had no problems communicating with the locals who mostly knew English, and combined with my Tagalog and my translators, I do not anticipate any difficulties with language.

Through the Elon College Fellows program and working with my mentor, Dr. Kristen Sullivan, I will be able to cultivate a well thought out methodology for completing my research. I will be co-mentored by Professor Ken Hassell, whose expertise in
documentary photography will be an invaluable resource to me through the documentary process from pre-production to post-production. With the help of the resources awarded to me by the Lumen scholarship, I will be able to purchase any materials necessary for conducting my research and composing my photo documentaries.

Overall, I feel that I am well prepared for this project. I have taken multiple courses including International Human Services and Digital Media Convergence, classes that have prepared me for international human services work and taught me how to use editing software, such as Photoshop and Final Cut Pro, respectively. This semester, I am enrolled in Research Methods in Human Services and Photography as a Social Critique, two more courses that will contribute to my preparedness for the proposed experiences. Most importantly, I have spent significant time forming relationships in the Philippines, and I have designed a program that builds on my previous experiences, strives to achieve intellectual goals, incorporates my two passions, and fits within a reasonable budget.

**Tentative Budget**

- **NC State Summer Social Work Program volunteering in Guatemala**  
  Program fee (includes housing, food, travel, course credit): $3,150
- **Documentary material**- Flip Mino HD video/voice recorder: $230
- **Maine Media Documentary Photography & Social Change Workshop**  
  Program fee and travel: $1,000
- **Rosetta Stone for Tagalog**  
  $400
- **Research in Oriental Mindoro, the Philippines**  
  Flight $1,500  
  Living Expenses $800  
  Research Materials including  
  -Cameras for PhotoVoice project  
  -Translator Compensation  
  -Paper/Ink for printing photos and surveys  
  $1,000
- **Study abroad in Christchurch, New Zealand**  
  Flight from the Philippines $600
### Other conferences/presentations

*Total Cost for Experiences*: $9,180  
*Tuition*: $5,820  
*Total Budget*: $15,000

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<th>Timeline</th>
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| **Summer 2010** | NC State Summer Social Work Program volunteering in Guatemala (including one-on-one Spanish class) | Experience working with my population of interest and observing issues that impact them  
Photographs and audio for photo-documentary surrounding an issue affecting young women in Guatemala  
Personal blog for reflection  
Practice with Spanish language skills |
| **Fall 2010** | Maine Media Documentary Photography & Social Change Workshop | A comprehensive knowledge of how to prepare for, research, shoot and edit a long-term documentary photography project, as well as the use of documentary photography for non-governmental organizations.  
College Fellows Junior Research Seminar  
Enroll in 2 credits of Independent Research |
| **Winter 2011** | Research in Oriental Mindoro, the Philippines (Enroll in 4 credits of Independent Research) | Interview audio and transcripts (translated into English)  
Completed surveys  
Photos and audio for photo-documentary  
Personal reflection blog |
| **Spring 2011** | Study abroad in Christchurch, New Zealand | Completed photo-documentary  
Monthly mini photo stories and personal blog |
| **Summer 2011** | SURE | Data analysis and draft of final Fellows paper |
| **Fall 2011** | Enroll in 2 credits of Independent Research | Prepare presentations for Spring  
Women’s Empowerment Conference  
Interaction with other professionals and scholars in the social sciences fields. |
| **Spring 2012** | SURF | Presentation of findings to the Elon community.  
Manuscript ready for publication in a journal. |
References


**Personal Information and Signatures:**

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