

Reflections on the Mexico Study Abroad Class

By Clark Barlow

First I want to express my gratitude to everyone who made this class possible: to Dr. Nelson for his leadership and vision, to the Department and College for making the class financially feasible, and to my classmates for their desire to participate and make a difference in the field of engineering.

When I reflect on the engineering study abroad class, I immediately want to ramble about how cool the trip was. It was definitely cool, but the class offers so much more than just a trip to Mexico. The class is a lesson on teamwork, on global environmental issues, and on what applied engineering means.

This class has taught me more about teamwork than probably any other class. Not only did we read about how to work as a team, we worked as a team. Since I don't speak Spanish it was a challenge to work with a partner that was still learning English and students in Mexico that knew even less. Despite the language barriers, however, Oliver and I learned a lot from each other and became good friends. I even grew close to the students in Mexico, making it hard to leave after spending just a couple of days with them. It was satisfying to complete such a worthwhile project together but almost



The Santiago River

equally as satisfying to feel the camaraderie among us once we did.

The class was a lesson on global environmental issues. It's one thing to hear professors talk about the environmental issues people are dealing with and another to see them in person.

The night after we saw, and smelled, the polluted Santiago River, and the waster water falls into Rio Blanco, I called my wife and told her that I was “forever changed.” I left realizing the tremendous importance of civil engineering and of our duty to better the world around us.

Before I took this class, the closest thing I got to applied engineering were field trips. This difference between this class and a field trip is that we got to witness the problems in Mexico and then make an effort to help. It was a wonderful opportunity to work on engineering projects that could actually make a difference. After years of completing textbook assignments with available answers in the back of the book, it was so refreshing to approach a real world problem and use our engineering training to address it. In my opinion, this was true engineering.

Not only was the class a rich engineering lesson, it was a rich cultural experience as well. In addition to the learning and collaborating, there was still time for pure, unadulterated tourism. We



explored mines in Zacatecas, entered probably a dozen temple-like cathedrals, toured a tequila factory (but did not sample), hiked around Aztec ruins at La Quemada, and even treated ourselves to Lucha Libre, Mexican wrestling. To anyone who is considering taking this class, I say do it! You will not regret it!