

W S E

Studying abroad

is always intended to provide students with an experience they couldn't have had on campus or at home by immersing them in another culture. But for Baylor Entrepreneurship students, studying abroad wasn't just about sightseeing or experiencing a new place. It was a fast-paced, two-week service project in Rwanda, Africa, that taught them more than any classroom, textbook or average study abroad program could.

"I think the easiest thing we can do as students is sit in a classroom and learn from a professor's lecture and a textbook," said Abbie Tolbert, senior Entrepreneurship major. "The true challenge comes when you have to go outside your comfort zone to learn and be taught by those who are unfamiliar to you."

Tolbert, along with nine other students, took the course Social Entrepreneurship in Africa in the spring. The course prepared them for the summer trip to Rwanda that would change their way of thinking about business in a developing country.

"Rwanda allowed me to see things firsthand, whereas in the classroom you learn theory, not necessarily application," said Zach Rogers, senior Entrepreneurship major. "Having the opportunity to tour a few companies from micro-finance institutions to trading companies gave me practical knowledge on the difficulties of starting a business in a developing nation."

Throughout the two-week period in Rwanda, the students and their professors met with different groups of people and shared ways to start or improve a business that could be vital to the groups' economic well-being. The students prepared presentations for each of these groups that would provide valuable insight to how the particular group could use small business development and entrepreneurship in their own lives.

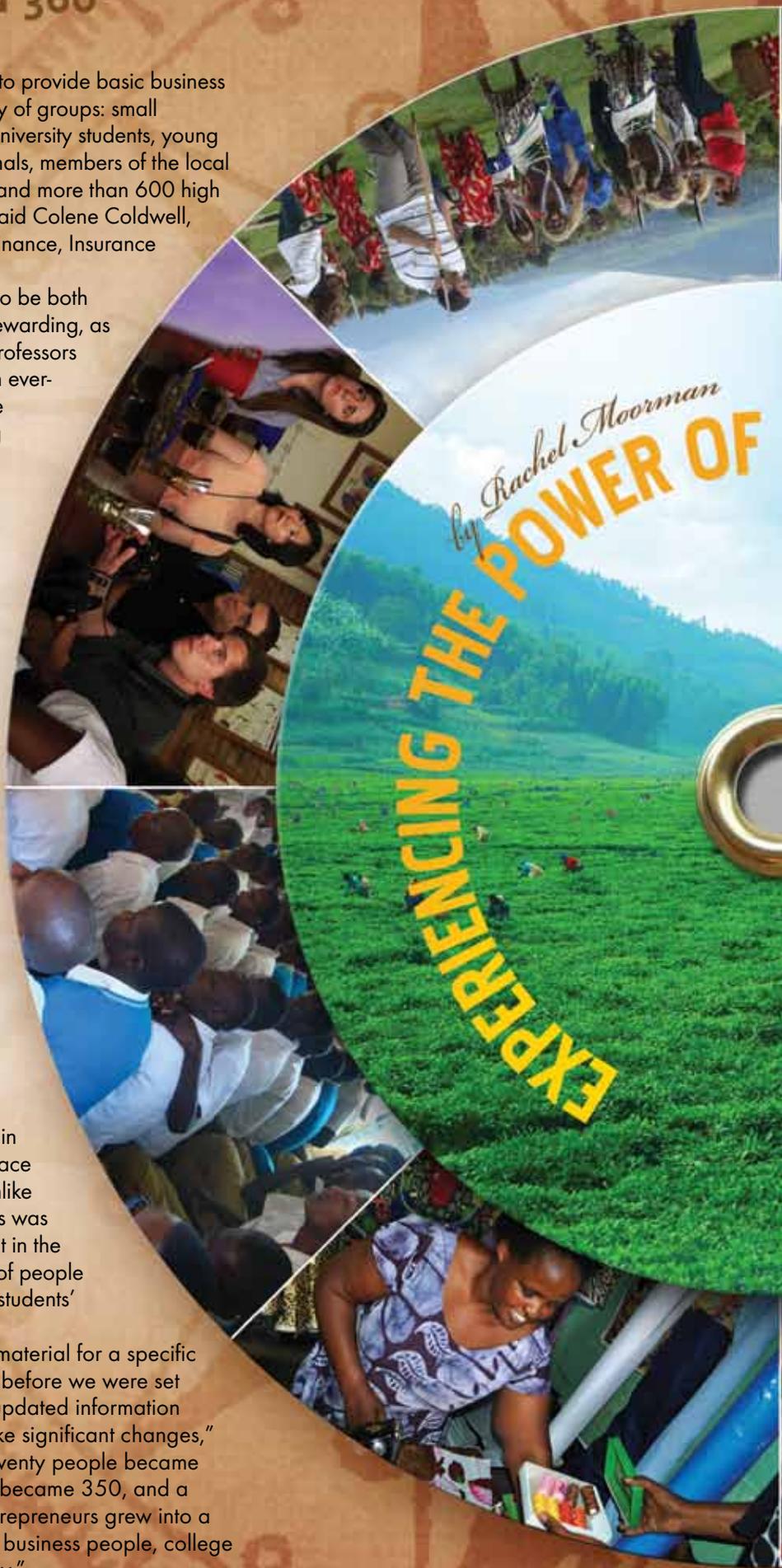
"We were able to provide basic business training to a variety of groups: small business owners, university students, young working professionals, members of the local Anglican diocese and more than 600 high school students," said Colene Coldwell, senior lecturer in Finance, Insurance and Real Estate.

The trip proved to be both challenging and rewarding, as the students and professors had to adjust to an ever-changing schedule and ever-changing expectations.

"We rarely did the same thing twice, and there was never a set routine because things changed from minute to minute," Tolbert said. "We toured businesses, gave business training, and were able to see how microfinance loans and trust groups worked."

This fluid schedule also taught the students about the culture of Rwanda, as they experienced a business climate in a country with a pace of life and work unlike that of the U.S. This was particularly evident in the growing numbers of people who attended the students' presentations.

"We prepared material for a specific group, then hours before we were set to 'go on stage,' updated information required us to make significant changes," Coldwell said. "Twenty people became 160, 160 people became 350, and a small group of entrepreneurs grew into a complex group of business people, college students and clergy."





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These meetings were larger and more diverse than expected, not only because rough estimates were given, but also because the people of Rwanda were anxious to hear what the students had to say. They were eager to learn how they could provide a sustainable income for themselves and their families.

"While developing countries clearly need financial assistance and training, they don't often derive long-term benefits from foreigners coming in, dumping food and money at their feet, and then leaving," Coldwell said. "If we help them learn the skills necessary to develop their own country, partner with them, walk alongside them and offer assistance when they ask for it, I believe it can be something that lasts."

The students subscribed to this long-term philosophy of business as one of the keys to economic development in a country like Rwanda as well.

"What I really learned on the trip is that business is the only way an economy can advance," said Jena Haywood, senior Economics and International Business major. "Any amount of aid will not help on its own. The will of the people to create businesses and to advance as an economy by working is the only way."

Because of this long-term mindset, the end of the trip did not signal the end of the business relationships developed with the Rwandan people.

"People drop in and out of developing countries, but we want to establish a long-

term presence there," Coldwell said. "We're trying to help the Rwandans help themselves by sharing the knowledge we've been blessed with."

Rogers echoed this sentiment. "By showing that we genuinely cared about the success of the Rwandan people, I believe that we helped empower them to make a difference in their country merely by our presence and willingness to try and meet their needs," he said.

While entrepreneurship and business are critical to the economy of a developing country, the students learned about an even greater value of development entrepreneurship.

"The most important thing I learned about entrepreneurship was not how it could help a country's economy, but how it can help empower a people," Tolbert said. "Together they can shape a country into something extraordinary."

Though the students went to Africa to teach others what they had learned, the most powerful lesson arrived in Rwanda, where the students saw the potential impact of their invested time.

"The true lesson comes when one takes the time to learn about another's life, their past, present and what they hope for the future," Tolbert said. "Only then can we truly see the effect entrepreneurship and other business practices have."

Observing current practices in Rwandan small businesses had its own impact on the students.

"Seeing the microfinance trust-groups we visited was one of the most valuable experiences," Haywood said. "There is not another way I could have seen the people and heard them speak about the way the loans have improved their lives."

While the students planned to help others grow by traveling to Rwanda, they experienced growth as well.

"I know that we touched the lives of those that we met by merely spending time getting to know them and educating them on how to start a business or improve a business they already have," Tolbert said. "But I believe that the people we served had more of an impact on each one of us than we could have ever expected to have on them."

