Tips for Volunteering/Service Learning in Africa

- You can't tell them how to do things.
- Short term opportunities are costly
- Expect less running water and/or electricity.
- Rural areas can be more traditional. Adapt to local norms.
- Life runs slow and work matches life.
- Tell your boss/mentor/leader if you are sick.
- Just because people don't show up on time doesn't mean that you don't have to.
- Unemployment is rampant in Africa. Don't take a job a local person could do.
- Don't make promises you can't keep- this goes for kids and adults.
- Biggest impact will be on you and not the community.
- Gifts. Penn gear, solar flash lights, lanterns and radios. Great for you while you are there and even better as a gift to leave behind for your host or boss.
- Once you get used to the slower pace in Africa you can feel like you are on vacation. Don't over play the slow pace. Show up on time and work hard while you are there. Africans know about the American- style of work pace. Have realistic expectations. Some days you will feel useless. Spend the time chatting with people.
- If you are going on a volunteer project, you can't just do research. It may be a conflict of interest. If you plan on collecting any data and using it for a paper that might be shared you must have IRB approval. Anecdotal information and papers that will not be shared does not need IRB approval. Remember that "sensitive issues" or "vulnerable groups" also need special IRB approval to be researched- poor people, children, sick people, etc. *(You probably know more about this than I do)*
- Always get permission from heads of the community, this could be men or women, but make sure you know who they are and you have spent time covering your agenda with them. This may take days or weeks. Find out the cultural greetings and basic language.
- If you want information about most things, you have to include women. Including women might take special effort. Visit women at convenient times, have women involved fully, be able to talk about things that might interest them, dress like they do, offer compensations, etc.
- Remove your hat and sunglasses when talking with anyone including your colleagues.
- Americans like to 'get down to business.' Don't do this in Africa. Greet properly before stating your business, even if it's just making a purchase in a store.
- Respect the age hierarchy and stratification. Always defer to someone older than you, and more so to people who are elderly or accomplished in another way (faculty, gov't official, NGO head, etc). You are not children so you will look strange if you are seen playing with the children as though you are one.
- It is much easier and appropriate for women outsiders to interact with women, especially in rural areas. Women outsiders can usually interact with men without a problem though interactions should always be out in the open.
- Your hosts are very concerned about your welfare. If they indicate that you should or shouldn't do something/go somewhere, etc., you should abide by their wishes as they will worry and feel personal responsibility for anything that may happen to you.