

CUNY Macaulay Honors College Ends Support for Macaulay Global Brigades

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Brigaders from last summer helped build eco-friendly latrines, septic tanks, and concrete floors for five families in a local community in Nicaragua. PHOTO/ Pooja Dutta

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On Wednesday, March 23, the executive board of the Macaulay Honors College's (MHC) chapter of Global Brigades (GB) sent out an email to current and past members, informing them that Macaulay Global Brigades would cease all operations and cancel this summer's upcoming brigades.

According to the email, GB met with Macaulay administration in February and was informed that Macaulay and CUNY Legal Counsel had numerous concerns with GB's "operational procedures."

Referencing a recent incident where three members of Columbia University's chapter of GB died in a bus accident during their service trip to Honduras, CUNY cited "safety measures (especially in the aftermath of the Columbia University tragedy), questions about the organization's finances, and ethical concerns about the medical procedures students participate in while abroad" as reasons for no longer supporting the program.

Global Brigades is a student-led organization that focuses on "global health and sustainable development." It conducts medical, dental, water, public health, microfinance, business, environmental, human rights, and engineering brigades every year to Nicaragua, Panama, and Honduras. Macaulay GB's most recent brigades took place last August, when the organization traveled to Nicaragua for a medical and public health dual brigade, and to Panama for a human rights brigade.

The chapter was very successful in attracting members and brigaders, in part because most Macaulay Honors students were able to use the Opportunities Fund to finance the trip. The Opportunities Fund provides up to \$7,500 to every Macaulay Honors student to fund various programs, including study abroad, research, internships, service learning and service programs, academic conferences, graduate education application fees, and graduate education exam fees.

"It was a great opportunity for Macaulay students mainly because service abroad trips are so expensive," said former Macaulay GB President and Brooklyn College senior, Patrick Yoo. "It allowed for students, who might not have normally had means to finance such an opportunity, a chance to engage with global issues and see first-hand what it's like in these countries."

Therefore, many former brigaders, including Anthony Ventimiglia, a CUNY alumnus and founder of Macaulay GB, were stunned by CUNY and MHC's actions and believe that finances may have been a contributing factor.



Brigaders from last summer wrapping up the medical portion of the dual brigade at the Pueblo Nuevo clinic in Nicaragua. PHOTO/ Brian Wang

“It’s difficult to ascertain what truly motivated CUNY/MHC to take this drastic action,” said Ventimiglia. “There is no direct evidence that financial concerns were the main motivator. That said, MHC’s current financial predicament is well known, and it seems as though the incident in Honduras was used opportunistically to suspend the organization.”

The “financial predicament” that Ventimiglia is referring is Macaulay’s current situation with the Opportunities Fund. Last semester, Macaulay announced to students in an email that the Opportunities Fund will be stricter with seniority and reasons for applying, hinting at a lack of finances to grant money to every applicant.

“Using the incident in Honduras may have allowed MHC to save face – we all know how much of a selling point study abroad/service abroad is to the program,” said Ventimiglia. “Instead of having to cite financial concerns as the reason for termination, the incident allowed MHC to stop club activities under the guise of student safety.”

Many executive board members also had issues with CUNY’s specific concerns. Global Brigades has hundreds of other chapters around the United States and the rest of the world, yet Macaulay’s was the one to be suspended after the tragic incident in Honduras. And even though Columbia University was affected most by the accident, its chapter is still operating and planning future brigades.

Additionally, according to the email that GB sent out, CUNY and MHC were uncertain over where GB’s finances were being directed. “The problem with this argument is that this exact information was required to be submitted to CUNY in the process of our approval as a student group,” said Ventimiglia. “Global Brigades also provides a breakdown readily available on their website.”

CUNY and MHC’s third concern, regarding the ethics of the medical brigades, also garnered significant criticism. “If this was a serious concern, then I’m not sure why CUNY and MHC failed to bring it up when the club was in the process of becoming established,” said Ventimiglia.

Overall, most members of the chapter criticized the fact that CUNY is the only university to begin voicing these concerns, while no other chapter has been forced to cease operations for similar reasons.

Former brigaders were disappointed with CUNY’s actions, especially after everything the chapter accomplished through its service in Nicaragua and Panama the past few years.

“It was just sad to see all the years of hard work and dedication that we put into making GB the largest student-led organization at Macaulay fall apart so quickly,” said Brooklyn College junior Marzuk Masub, who is a former GB Event Coordinator and Alumni Relations team member. “Being involved with the club for three years now, I’m still having a tough time coming to terms with the administration’s decision.”

Many pre-medical and other pre-health students participated in Macaulay GB, especially in the medical brigade, for valuable medical and service experience that could be useful for their further education and careers. The fact that the Opportunities Fund mostly funded the trip’s expenses made the situation ideal for Macaulay Honors students. Now, students will have to search for alternatives in order to find a similar experience.

“It was like a rite of passage for pre-med students,” said BC sophomore Jerry Jose. “It really hurts students who don’t have the finances to pay for study abroad and service abroad trips, and students will have to look really hard to find a similar experience in another country. To be honest, Global Brigades is the only organization that really offered that.”

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