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Study Abroad: Essentials in Recruitment and Interdisciplinary Practice

Vanessa Robinson-Dooley, Alan Kirk, and Jennifer Riapos

Abstract

Study abroad programs offer unique opportunities for students to gain valuable educational and life experience. These experiences support a well-rounded education and prepare the students to work in a more global society. Many study abroad programs are designed with undergraduates as the target audience and may not meet the academic needs or life situations of the graduate student. This paper describes the authors' observations based on their experiences with developing and implementing study abroad programs. This writing discusses lessons learned and offers recommendations for expanding existing programs to attract graduate students.

Study Abroad: Essentials in Recruitment & Interdisciplinary Education

Study Abroad excursions have been shown to increase a student's perception of the value of their overall educational experience, expand their worldview, and become more comfortable with diversity (Jackson & Nyoni, 2012). For the most part, students who participate in these experiences are traditional undergraduate students, as they are the easiest cohort to recruit. Graduate students are often ignored in systematic outreach campaigns because of the common assumption that they are not available due to family or work responsibilities. During the last decade, data captured from American colleges and universities demonstrate that only a very small percentage of students participating in study abroad courses are graduate students (> 2 %). The largest group are baccalaureate Juniors (36%). About 40% of study abroad students invest an entire academic semester or quarter. The average length of a study abroad course in the U.S. is now about 4-8 weeks. Thus, for at least the last few decades, study abroad initiatives recruit and register mostly undergraduate college and university students. The assumption is made that graduate students do not have time or inclination to participate (IOIE, 2010; NAFSA, 2010; Vistawide, 2015).

It was not until several years ago that there was even much interest in study abroad programs specifically for graduate students (Lindsey, 2005). Study Abroad programs are normally designed with undergraduates in mind thus; there may be a lack of academic rigor attached to the study abroad course. This article will present a case for expanding existing

university based, faculty-led programs to actively include graduate students. Moreover, it will describe experiences and lessons learned over the last several years with a United States-based study abroad program that caters primarily to graduate students in both full and part-time academic programs. These experiences are defined by cultural norms inherent to the United States but increasing learning outcomes and the value of the experience is a goal that is universal to study abroad programs.

Cultivating a World View

Many master's level graduate programs place heavy emphasis on applied learning. The underpinnings of theory and practice issues are examined as a foundation for practice applications. Participation in a study abroad opportunity allows for a substantial expansion of the students perception about professional practice in other cultures. Dramatic cultural or professional differences as well as the more subtle ones allow the student to adapt their practice skill to diverse situations and people, work towards becoming interculturally effective practitioners (Lindsey, 2005; Boateng & Thompson, 2013). This expansion includes the possibility of learning from the teachings of a professor from another culture as well as participating with students from other cultures. The contrast of this academic setting is a powerful tool for retention of concepts and information. Students will learn concepts that will build on their academic courses taken thus far. They will also learn new concepts that may challenge the cultural applicability of what they have learned. This contrast, and the challenge of conceptualizing how to utilize this new information, will be memorialized for these students as a major academic "take-away" from their study abroad experience.

Skill Focused

Graduate programs, specifically the discipline of the authors of this writing, focus on skill development and preparation for professional practice in a variety of social service agency settings. For example, the Master of Social Work (MSW) program with a clinical emphasis, places significant emphasis on clinical practice skill development in the classroom and then practice of these clinical skills out in the field. Students are required to not only carry a full course load for each of the four semesters that they are in the program but they are also required to complete 560-600 hours in the field (field practicum) for these 4 semesters. The course work is strategically developed to ensure that they are learning the skills at the level they should be using them in the field. First year MSW students complete generalist practice courses focused on human behavior, diversity and social justice, and policy. In their second year of the program they focus on clinical skills; clinical skills and working with groups, individuals, and theory related to interventions. Students in most programs are often given the opportunity to register for a "free elective" that will compliment or build on their area of interest within the program. Study abroad programs provide an educational opportunity to support these programs in a way that builds on their current clinical development and afford them additional opportunities to use critical thinking to emerge as well-rounded clinicians. Study abroad programs can be used to increase intercultural knowledge and promote international learning.

Intercultural knowledge and competence has been defined as "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett, 2008). Intercultural knowledge encourages the teaching of concepts that relate on a global scale. Healy (2008) asserts that with increased globalization comes "new opportunities for social work practice" (p. 4-6). Given that migration patterns, prevalence of many social issues impacting many cultures, and the fact that our government response (or resolution) has an impact globally, social workers must broaden their focus of reference (Merrill & Frost, 2011). Study abroad should provide students the opportunity to see those same social issues they learn about in class (lack of affordable quality healthcare, homelessness, substance abuse, violence in families, etc.) in international settings and understand that the problems in their community are actual problems around the world. Students understanding of the impact of global policy on their community might be limited by what they read about (very limited) in their courses or learn from their instructors. Additionally, if the student has never traveled outside of the United States, their understanding of the term "global society" has no context and is merely conjecture. A potential outcome of traveling abroad could be increased student awareness of the global nature of poverty, human suffering, oppression and other social problems discussed in their social work program (Witkin, 1999; Boyle et al, 1999).

International learning has been defined as gaining international and intercultural experiences to reflect upon what values are local and which are universal, rather than making assumptions about the universality of both values and practice standards (Merrill & Frost, 2011). The foundation of international learning is that practice skills are taught to build the competency of the student in various settings. Study abroad programs should integrate practice components that require the students to apply the skills they have learned in their course work and then critique their applicability in this international setting. As part of their study abroad experience, students should be working in social service agencies serving individuals living with such challenges as poverty, oppression, mental health, and violence (not tourism). They will then be provided the opportunity to apply the skills they have learned in the classroom. For example, 2nd year social work graduate students are taught the theories which are the foundations of the evidence based interventions they are using in individual and group clinical work. Some instructors discuss the Eurocentric view and development of these theories, but study abroad can introduce and reinforce the plausibility of the application in other cultures. There is then the opportunity for students to use their critical thinking skills to make these interventions useful in helping another population and improve their cultural application. This focus on application and skill development from a cultural perspective contributes to the building of the cultural competence of our students through more than textbooks, readings, and discussions in the classroom.

How to Make it Work

Faculty Teams/Interdisciplinary Approach

The literature is filled with writers' emphasis on the usefulness of interdisciplinary teaching and the benefits to the instructors and the students (Cann, 2000). Utilizing the interdisciplinary approach to train students has been found to increase cultural awareness

and insight into other disciplines that may be represented in the curriculum and/or through faculty. Students have greater access to the professors and utilize that access by asking questions and engaging in discussions related to their experiences while abroad. Each discipline can provide a different perspective of daily experiences that benefit the students' learning and can impact their worldviews (Cann, 2000).

The interdisciplinary approach, although one with noted benefits, can be problematic to implement. Professional disciplines, especially practice disciplines, have a tendency to work in "silos". Whether it is to protect one's professional position, client, or a lack of understanding about how other disciplines can support a process, individuals find themselves working against each other in the workplace (Solomon, 2010). In many settings, such as domestic violence in primary care, emergency rooms, and community mental health providers, it has been found that when disciplines work together patients/clients receive better service and report higher satisfaction with that service (Solomon, 2010). This same result can be true and beneficial to study abroad programs. Utilization of faculty teams and working from an interdisciplinary perspective can make the planning and implementation of any program effective.

Faculty teams are groups of individuals from different departments (i.e. academic departments, faculty/staff, Residential Life/housing, etc.) who work together to provide support to the students, as well as the Study Abroad office (Rhodes et al., 2012). These teams work toward a goal that will serve to provide a productive and memorable educational experience for students. Additionally, in the case of study abroad programs, the often-overwhelming university requirements, meetings, trainings and documentation can spread amongst the team to ensure the burden is not one or two individuals. The use of faculty teams could result in efficiency and provide more opportunity for faculty to include more creative ideas into their programs (Rhodes et al., 2012). Sharing the development and implementation process will free up time for the inclusion of other ideas to increase the educational experience for the students (Rhodes et al., 2012).

For a faculty team to be productive and achieve their desired results, they must work from a true interdisciplinary and collaborative place (not just on paper). Planning must include a focus on the learning objectives of each discipline. Activities (service projects, site visits, guest instructors, etc.) must have the broad focus for each discipline but be a learning experience that all of the students can appreciate. Interdisciplinary training has been found to be effective for graduate education (Graham-Howard & Scott, 2011). Graduate students will inevitably enter a working world of collaborative teams and interdisciplinary service delivery. A study abroad developed with this focus in mind will be attractive to graduate students and prepare them for the "real world" of working on teams with other disciplines, with a different focus/lens and understanding how your work can support the work of the team.

Attached to a Required Course

It is important to understand that graduate students work with substantial time and resource constraints. A 2-week or 10-day "academic tour" may be attractive to a graduate student but not practical given these constraints. To ensure success, the study abroad experience must be anchored in a course that will substitute for a required course in the student's graduate program. Undergraduate students normally have 12 to 15 semester hours of free

electives: graduate students do not. Graduate curricula are normally sequential, fixed, and rigid. Unless this issue is addressed in the design of the program, the study abroad experience will become too expensive in both time and money.

Cost & Length

To be attractive to a graduate cohort, the study abroad course must be rather short. Graduate students can easily spend a week to 10 days away from their classes if the program faculty are aware of the value of the experience, are supportive, and will allow the student to make up any assigned work or readings. Many graduate courses are organized around a once per week paradigm (3.5 hour classes once per week). Missing an entire week of these classes can be problematic without the cooperation of the faculty. A 10-day study abroad excursion can be designed with an outcome that requires the student to miss only one week of classes. This minimizes the impact of the student's workload and their anxiety about missing class. A supportive and flexible faculty will greatly assist in this process. Therefore, pre-work with the faculty in terms of planning and subject content is essential.

Many graduate students do in fact have jobs and families and resources are limited; parents are often not available to pay for expenses and tuition. To ensure success, planning must include minimal costs. This process usually starts with minimizing the salary of participating faculty. Of course, the program must pay for expenses of the faculty member. However, if the budget proposes to pay a summer salary unit or even a smaller amount, the cost of participation may be a challenge for many graduate students. Our program starts by affirming that participating faculty will have all expenses paid but will receive no compensation. This of course limits the pool of motivated faculty. However, the ones that do participate are highly motivated for the experience. This has been a very controversial policy for this program. University guidelines are clear about compensating study abroad faculty. It is not recommended that other programs consider this. This is the process for this program because it makes the graduate program work. To do otherwise would increase the cost of travel for students and decrease the number of individuals able to participate in the experience.

Conclusions

Study abroad opportunities can enrich a graduate program of studies. This article has presented the value of such experiences and also reviewed several key obstacles inherent in recruiting a graduate cohort. A case was made for implementing a few minor modifications that would make study abroad experiences available to most graduate students. These changes would cost very little but yield substantial benefits to programs of international study.

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