

Beyond Study Abroad: An Alternative International Experience

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The 1990's have been a decade of increasing globalization and growing interdependence among the nations of the world. Colleges and universities have responded to this phenomenon in a variety of ways, including revamping of the core curriculum, implementation of cross-cultural student and faculty exchanges, and expansion of extracurricular campus programs and activities with an international focus.

One way that colleges of business have approached the challenge of globalization is through requiring students to complete an international course within their major area of study. Marketing majors, for examples, are typically required to take a single course in international marketing involving brief coverage of the topics of culture, geodemographics, and economic and political systems of the world. This is commonly followed by a more intense treatment of how the marketing firm may alter the product, its distribution, promotional strategy, and pricing to accommodate international differences. A course of this type serves to sensitize the business student to the need for thinking globally rather than locally, while at the same time satisfying the international requirements of accrediting agencies.

Exposure of the student to global issues in a traditional classroom setting is undoubtedly beneficial in "expanding the horizons" of the learner. Yet as professors of international business who have taught these courses on a regular basis, we, the authors, have often felt the frustration of trying to impart a global way of thinking within the confines of a U.S. classroom. Using guest speakers with international experience, cross-cultural simulation exercises, and field trips to foreign-owned businesses are all useful means of reinforcing a global message, but these activities are poor substitutes for true, hands-on experience. This is particularly evident when one is teaching students whose international experiences are limited to spring breaks in Cancun. Preparing students to work in an international environment without having them actually *experience* a foreign setting is analogous to teaching someone how to ride a bicycle without ever mounting the bicycle. What our students needed, we concurred, was the opportunity to witness international marketing on a first-hand basis through some kind of international study experience.

The Limitations of Traditional Study Abroad Programs

Generations of American college students have

participated in study abroad programs, which typically involve students spending extended periods of time living, and studying abroad. These programs often have a heavy foreign language component, requiring students to take courses taught in the native tongue of the country in which they are living. While the liberal arts have long embraced the study abroad concept, the business disciplines have been slower in becoming involved. Foreign students have come to the United States for years to study American business practices, but U.S. business students have not done likewise.

For our business students here at Kennesaw State University, a number of factors limit study abroad participation, chief of which are work and family responsibilities typical of non-traditional, commuter students. Another limitation is lack of facility in a foreign language. Following semester conversion, business students at our institution have no foreign language requirement which would prepare them for study abroad opportunities. Finally, business students tend to be more pragmatic than exploratory in the way they approach their academic careers, reluctant to embark on anything which might delay graduation and entry into their chosen careers. Yet given the exponential growth of international trade, particularly within the NAFTA partnership, these students have much to gain from a "study abroad" experience tailored to meet their specific needs and addressing obstacles facing the non-traditional business student. Against this backdrop, KSU's Mexico-NAFTA Study Tour was born.

Kennesaw's Mexico-NAFTA Study Tour

To attract the commuter and working students, a business study tour must have several essential features, all of which distinguish it from a traditional study abroad experience. First and foremost, it must demonstrate international business in action. Foreign settings which draw visitors based on their rich cultural heritage or spectacular scenery are not necessarily ideal choices for a business-oriented educational tour. Second, the tour must be short enough in duration that students can be granted work leave and take time away from family responsibilities. Travel distance is another important consideration, since more distant locales involve greater time spent in transit and higher costs which must be passed on to the student. Finally, to be sufficiently compelling to the pragmatist business student, a theme-based study tour is preferable to one lacking a specific focus.

With these essential features in mind, a two-week,

NAFTA-oriented tour of Mexico was developed. As a fellow member of NAFTA and the U.S.' second largest trading partner, Mexico is an increasingly important market for U.S. business. It is important to the economic well being of Georgia as well, given that Mexico purchases millions of dollars worth of goods from the state each year. For these reasons, Mexico is an obvious and logical, though often ignored, choice for today's business student.

Because of its practical focus on NAFTA, our program was offered as a cross-disciplinary one focusing on both the economic and political aspects of NAFTA. Faculty member Michele Zebich-Knos came from International Affairs, while the other two of us came from marketing. Each side brought his/her own expertise to the formula. Students were thus offered the attractive option of earning six semester hours of credit, satisfying some of their business and non-business elective requirements in a concentrated period of time. In preparation for the trip, students spent five intensive weekend afternoons in the spring semester in the classroom, discussing outside readings and listening to faculty lectures and guest speakers from the Atlanta-area Mexican community. By the time our students set foot on Mexican soil, they were somewhat familiar with the business and social cultures of Mexico.

For several reasons, no foreign language experience was required of the course participants. First, for many of those who had not previously studied Spanish, there was insufficient room in their curriculum for both a language course and the six credit hours taken up by our two international study courses. Requiring foreign language instruction prior to the trip would have, therefore, significantly reduced the pool of potential students. In addition, the instructors have learned from past study trips that students experience so many new encounters while traveling in a foreign country that little incremental language learning takes place.

The tour took place in May of 1999, during the three-week gap between spring and summer semesters. Timing of the trip was planned so that students would be able to take summer courses upon their return. The tour consisted of on-site visits to business and factories, as well as to an embassy and consulate, the Mexican-

American Chamber of Commerce, and the state of Georgia's own trade center in Mexico City. Since our goal was to promote a better understanding of Mexico and NAFTA, the tour included stays in four cities: Monterrey in the industrial heartland; Guadalajara, the so-called "Silicon Valley" of Mexico; Cuernavaca, home to U.S. retailers such as Sam's and Home Depot; and finally, Mexico City, the ancient and modern-day capital of Mexico. Cultural excursions were included in the trip as well; these consisted of day trips to a number of historical and archaeological sites. Our itinerary thus offered students a good cross-sectional view of Mexican industry, not to mention its culture and regional diversity.

Students stayed in family homes throughout much of the trip, due to cost considerations and the cultural experience which home stays afford. While the students expressed some apprehension about staying in the homes of strangers, especially non-English speaking ones, many felt later that this was one of the most memorable and worthwhile aspects of the trip.

Reflections of the Tour

Leading a group of thirty-eight students through a foreign, non-English speaking country was not always easy. Our students experienced stomach ailments, fatigue, and instances of extreme homesickness. A handful had a difficult time adapting to the food and/or culture. We faculty felt exasperated at times, wondering what we had gotten ourselves into and why. All said and done, however, the good far outweighed the bad, and the experience produced some unforeseen outcomes. The course accomplished its educational objectives, as we expected it would. Equally important, the students forged friendships that did not exist prior to the trip, both with each other and with the Mexicans they encountered along the way. Many discussed planning to return, bringing their spouses or children the next time around. Several students enrolled in Spanish when summer school began, while many more expressed an intention of doing so at the first available opportunity. Some also expressed a newfound interest in an international business career as a result of the trip. Most significantly, thirty-eight people returned to the U.S. with a broadened worldview and a deeper cultural appreciation.