

Faculty Perceptions of Teaching Circles: A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

Doyin Coker-Kolo & Gary D. Fisk, Georgia Southwestern State University; Leisa R. Easom, Macon State University; & Thedis W. Bryant, Albany State University

Abstract

Teaching circles facilitate faculty development through the formation of learning communities in which faculty members can discuss teaching innovations and share experiences. Although teaching circle programs are widespread, few studies to date have specifically examined how teaching circle participants perceive their teaching circle activities. The authors examined faculty perceptions of teaching circles by a survey that covered potentially positive and negative attributes of the program. The results show that most teaching circle participants have positive attitudes towards the program and feel they have obtained substantive benefits from participating in teaching circles. These findings support previous work showing that teaching circles are a beneficial means for promoting faculty development.

The faculty and staff at institutions of higher education have an ongoing need to develop new skills. Many faculty, for example, are not explicitly trained in teaching techniques during their graduate education (McKeachie, 2002). Much of their pedagogical training comes from professional development programs taken after they begin teaching. In addition, new technologies have dramatically changed the nature of higher education. Skills that were learned before faculty members received their degrees may quickly become obsolete, thereby necessitating new training and making continuous faculty and staff development essential to keep up with technological innovations. Faculty development is also important to accrediting

agencies, most of which require evidence that regular training opportunities are provided to faculty and staff members.

Teaching circles are widely used for faculty and staff development throughout higher education. Each circle is a small group of individuals (4 to 10) who meet regularly over the course of an academic year to discuss innovations in teaching and other topics important to academia. Group members may, for example, read a particular article on a new teaching method, and discuss the merits of the technique. Group members may share experiences that are related to this technique, thereby enabling them to learn from each other. Teaching circles can thus be viewed as a form of collaborative learning among faculty and staff and an avenue for them to engage in productive conversations about the intellectual processes of the university (Boud, 1999; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991).

Teaching Circles as a Vehicle for Collegiality

Faculty members who participate in teaching circles make teaching more public when they engage in intellectual exchanges about teaching in an open and nonjudgmental environment (Cox, 2001). This climate of community learning creates collegiality, a broader term which describes not just the collaboration among faculty engaged in teaching circles, but the camaraderie that subsequently develops. Boud (1999) used the term “reciprocal peer learning” to describe teaching circles. From his standpoint, teaching circles provide a

more collegial view of academic work in which participants reflect and explore ideas about teaching in an atmosphere of openness and freedom. Indeed, teaching circle discussions may be the birthplace for productive intellectual exchanges on college campuses. The ensuing collegial interaction may also lead participants to feel a sense of “stakeholding” or “ownership” of any resulting changes – possibly yielding a positive outcome for university growth (Blackwell, Channell, & Williams, 2001).

Teaching circles also enhance faculty and staff socialization. Scharff (2003) suggests that an advantage of participating in campus-based teaching circles is the cultivation of faculty friendships across campus. Scharff reports that those involved in the circles feel like they belong to a university-wide intellectual and social community as opposed to feeling isolated in their own departments. The circles revitalize faculty and give them new ideas and techniques to try in their classroom. Those faculty members who are comfortable with their teaching strategies can also benefit by sharing their ideas and gaining information they had not considered previously. Similarly, Black and Cessna (2003) assert that teaching circles work best when members feel a public commitment to enhance their teaching expertise, a sense of accountability to peers, and self-efficacy as well as a sense of social support and safety. Faculty members generally focus on subjects in their own area, and as a result, find it difficult to see beyond their own field. Hence, discussions with faculty in other fields in teaching circles can be stimulating. Knowledge from another discipline can transform them into listeners and learners thus enhancing the faculty member's ability to perform the dual functions of teaching and learning typical of an academic community. Blackwell, et al. (2001) consider teaching circles as a

potential support mechanism benefiting part-time teachers by stimulating peer support for addressing in-class problems, and projects such as experimentation with novel teaching methods.

Transformation and Empowerment through Teaching Circles

According to Hutchings (1996), teaching circles are a way of transforming teaching into a community property. Faculty members at institutions with a teaching mission are often unable to pursue extensive research activities and publication due to heavy teaching loads and non-teaching responsibilities. However, they read scholarly materials to inform their teaching and introduce innovations into the profession. Many faculty members also strive to translate activities and innovations in their classrooms into scholarly materials to share their ideas with a wider audience in the academic community. The process of transforming practical experiences into scholarly work takes time, and does not always have an immediate impact on the local university community. Teaching circles could offer a more effective means to encourage classroom innovations and facilitate the dissemination of faculty accomplishments. For example, one of us has worked for several years on improving traditional instruction by supplementing courses with concepts from online instruction. This strategy has transformed his courses from ordinary four-exams-per-semester courses into a more carefully paced structure with numerous small quizzes and assignments. A small quiz and/or assignment are due almost every week, which discourages the common pattern of student disengagement followed by cramming just before the exam. This pedagogical innovation is very practical and may serve as an inspiration for other faculty

members to incorporate technology into their teaching. Another outcome of teaching circles at our institution is the creation of certificate programs (Women Studies and European Studies). Both of these interdisciplinary programs showcase the skills of the instructors and their ability to collaborate across disciplines in offering richer educational experiences for students.

Lovett and Gilmore (2003) describe how teachers can take ownership of their professional development. Their conclusions lead to five interconnecting principles underpinning the development of effective teacher learning and development approaches. The principles are “school cultures that value learning; opportunities for learning with others; collegial relationships; learning networks and approaches; and (making sense of) teachers’ experiences” (p. 207). These principles not only describe the benefits of teaching circles, but also serve as a vehicle for teacher empowerment. Faculty can also utilize these principles as guidelines or support measures as they seek out opportunities for professional development.

An Evaluation of Teaching Circles at a Small Public University

This evaluation is based on a survey of faculty members at a small state university in rural Georgia (USA). At this institution, the teaching circle program is a principle method for enhancing instructional leadership and professional development. The institution has a teaching circle coordinator who organizes the various groups and publicizes the meeting locations and dates. Each teaching circle has a facilitator and 4 to 5 members. Faculty participation in the teaching circles is actively encouraged through a small financial incentive (attendance at 3 meetings: \$100; 6 meetings: \$200). The

groups are usually interdisciplinary and based on topics of common interest. Faculty members use teaching circle meetings as opportunities to share ideas, promote their accomplishments, and advance the mission of the university. Although faculty members participate in lecture series, colloquia, workshops, distinguished faculty awards, and art exhibitions, none of these efforts have enjoyed as much popularity and longevity as the teaching circles. They provide an authentic context for faculty members to share perspectives on teaching and scholarship. Teaching circles exist across disciplines, and faculty rank, thus exhibiting strong potential for growth. Additionally, teaching circles fosters collegiality with each participant seen as contributing equally.

This paper represents an effort to inform both the local audience (administrators, scholars and educators) in the geographical area of our institution, and the larger audiences in academia about teaching circles as a tool for enhancing faculty collaboration and professional development. Specifically, we explore ways in which faculty members perceive teaching circles as beneficial or non-beneficial to teaching, scholarship, and professional development. Our findings are based upon quantitative and qualitative data from a survey of teaching circle participants. The intent of the survey was to learn more about faculty perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching circle program at this particular university, and its contributions to faculty development.

Method

Participants

Forty-eight people attending a general faculty meeting completed the survey. This represented a 49.5%

participation rate for individuals who had attended at least one teaching circle meeting during the 2003-2004 academic year. The participants were about equally divided between women ($n = 26$, 54.2%) and men ($n = 19$, 39.6%), with a few people unidentified ($n = 3$, 6.3%). Most participants were assistant professors ($n = 16$, 33.3%), followed by full professors ($n = 10$, 20.8%), associate professors ($n = 9$, 18.8%), and other ($n = 3$, 6.3%). The participants had a mean of 9.3 ($SD = 8.7$) years of service to the institution.

Survey

The survey included demographic questions, questions about the positive aspects of teaching circles, questions about obstacles to the success of teaching circles, and general questions about the teaching circle program. The questions regarding positive aspects and obstacles to success were Likert-scaled from 1 to 5, with 1 representing *strongly disagree* and 5 *strongly agree*. The general questions about the teaching circles highlighted (a) the overall impression of teaching circles, (b) the importance of a monetary incentive, (c)

the number of meetings attended, (d) the number of groups attended, and (e) a list of accomplishments from the teaching circles.

Results

The survey participants had a positive overall impression of the teaching circle program ($M = 4.4$, $SD = .9$). Accordingly, the questions about the positive aspects of teaching circles generally elicited positive responses (see Table 1). The most highly rated aspects of the teaching circles were communication, interdisciplinary exchanges, collaboration, and faculty incentives. Questions regarding university mission, professional development, and positive effects upon student learning were rated somewhat lower, but were above neutral. The questions on writing projects and curriculum development were rated about neutral. The questions about obstacles to the success of teaching circles focused on teaching circles being time consuming, unfocused, met infrequently, lacked continuity, and fell short of expectations. The majority of the respondents chose the “disagree” rating for all the questions (see Table 2).

Table 1. Positive Aspects of Teaching Circles

Question	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>N</i>
Strengthen communication	4.3 (1.0)	48
Foster interdisciplinary exchanges	4.2 (1.0)	48
Foster collaboration	4.1 (1.1)	48
Provide faculty incentives	4.1 (1.0)	48
Promote university mission	3.7 (1.1)	47
Promote writing projects	2.9 (1.1)	47
Aid curriculum development	3.3 (1.1)	46
Enhance professional development	3.9 (1.1)	48
Positively impact student learning	3.5 (1.1)	46

Table 2. Negative Aspects/Obstacles of Teaching Circles

Question	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>N</i>
Time consuming	2.4 (1.1)	46
Unfocused or unorganized	2.1 (1.1)	46
Infrequent meetings	2.1 (1.0)	46
Fall short of expectations	2.1 (1.2)	46
Lack of continuity	2.1 (1.1)	45

Moreover, 60% of the participants indicated they would participate in the teaching circle program without a financial incentive while only 29% indicated they might participate without a monetary reward. Only three individuals (6.3%) indicated they would definitely not participate if the financial incentive was discontinued. The participants attended a mean of 7.3 meetings ($SD = 4.7$) and participated in two different teaching circle groups ($SD = 1.1$). This suggests that most people in the teaching circle program went beyond the minimum number of meetings necessary to collect the financial reward as only three meetings were required to collect the minimum financial reward, and six meetings were required for the maximum.

The open-ended written comments regarding the accomplishments of the teaching circles were grouped into several distinct themes, which included faculty development, increased communication/interdisciplinary interaction, and improved morale. The most common response was that the teaching circles improved morale by providing a means to discuss teaching problems and concerns with a peer group. A number of responses suggested that the teaching circles were valuable for developing new programs and enhancing technology skills. Only one response was negative, which described teaching circles as "an utter waste of time."

The following are examples of positive comments on the teaching circle program provided by survey participants in response to the question "Please list up to three accomplishments of your teaching circle (s) this year."

- "Impacted specific classes/courses. Impacted choice of learning communities. Personal/professional development."
- "Fosters faculty communication and friendships across disciplines. Provides true intellectual stimulation. Excellent method of trading advice on teaching, research/publication, service."
- "Meet with new faculty members and learned about other programs. Release of tension."
- "Exchange of approaches to teaching that I would not have considered. Understanding of problems in other disciplines related to student skills in my field."

Discussion

Overall, faculty reported that participation in teaching circles fostered an increase in interdisciplinary exchanges and collaborations. Only a few professors viewed the teaching circles with any negativity, citing "time consuming" as an obstacle to participation. Most faculty

reported that the benefits of teaching circle participation far outweighed the time and effort involved in participating with the group. The present data are congruent with findings of earlier studies in that teaching circles appear to foster collegiality in the form of communication, facilitation and newfound friendships with faculty in other disciplines (Black & Cessna 2003; Lovett & Gilmore, 2003). This study adds empirical evidence that demonstrates the perceived effectiveness of teaching circles, thereby supporting the published literature on teaching circles, which has been largely qualitative in nature.

The lowest rated items on the positive aspects of teaching circles were questions about “promoting writing projects”, “aid curriculum development” and “positively impacts student learning”, all of which had mean scores near 3 out of 5 on the Likert scale (neutral). The result from “positively impacts student learning” is particularly surprising given that the primary goal of teaching circles is to improve student learning experiences. The most likely reason for the low ratings on these survey items is that some teaching circles did not expressly focus the topics in the survey question, such as writing or student learning. For example, one teaching circle was a book club in which the participants read books and then discussed the book in the meeting. Some of the books covered in a circle like this might have relatively little impact on student writing or student learning. Another example would be that some teaching circles have focused on governance issues, and therefore have little to do with student learning. The teaching circle leaders in the survey sample have the freedom to cover a wide range of topics, many of which may not have much impact on student learning. Thus, the low ratings on these items do not necessarily indicate that the teaching circles were not beneficial. Perhaps the teaching

circles would be more effective for positively influencing student educational experiences if the topics were explicitly limited to teaching techniques and issues directly related to teaching.

The overall findings from the survey strongly suggest a very positive perception of the contributions of teaching circles to professional development by the faculty. Therefore, the teaching circle program will continue to thrive. Teaching circles are valuable tools in the teaching-learning journey of faculty members by furthering scholarly discourse about instructional strategies and issues of interest in higher education. To strengthen the teaching circle program, future directions could include expanding topics to include issues such as service learning and balancing family and work. This will be of interest to not just the faculty but also the staff and might help to secure the interest and participation of a larger segment of the university community. Maintaining the financial incentive for teaching circle participation is also important and serves to motivate (perhaps only initially) faculty to contribute especially in current times of restricted budgets.

The ultimate goal for any teaching circle is to reinforce team building, open discussion, camaraderie, and consulting between faculty in different departments and across ranks. Based on the teaching circles survey results, one can only conclude that faculty and staff at this small rural university utilize teaching circles to strengthen their teaching and communication skills, aid curriculum development, promote student writing projects, and enhance their overall professional development. As one faculty member expressed, “A teaching circle is the doorway through which senior and new faculty seek advice to commonly occurring problems (with students) among departments and provide positive solutions

to those problems.” Although many college and university professors feel they are hired for their expertise, participants in the study concurred that it was good to converse with others outside of their discipline. However, if some faculty members like the idea of being involved in teaching circles but are uncomfortable starting at the university level, they have the option to organize a circle within their own department. Future efforts at organizing and maintaining teaching circles should be aimed at inspiring more faculty members to facilitate their own teaching circles. The time and energy invested in this collaborative learning experience can positively contribute to faculty development, and the overall quality of instruction in any institution.

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Note

Send correspondence to Doyin Coker-Kolo, Department of Middle Grades and Secondary Education, School of Education, Georgia Southwestern State University, Americus, GA 31709; e-mail dck@canes.gsw.edu

Internationalizing the Faculty by Way of an International Spring Break Tour

Donald Vest
Clark Atlanta University

Abstract

In today's interdependent global economy, the internationalization of the faculty is a dire necessity. As the intellectual and driving force of academic institutions, a cadre of faculty, or indeed the entire faculty, must participate in the internationalization paradigm shift. A well-designed International Spring Tour provides first-hand, experiential learning to faculty and student participants and offers an ingenious method that helps to internationalize the college, curriculum, faculty, and students. Unlike traditional exchange programs, the International Spring Tour lasts for 2 weeks and takes place during spring break. This, in turn, causes little disruption in the responsibilities and lifestyles of faculty participants, while helping to promote the process of internationalization induced by the college, corporations, and accrediting bodies.

As American multinational corporations, governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations increase their presence in the global arena, academic institutions will play an increasingly important role in preparing graduates to compete in an international environment. Without a doubt, today's complex, global economy demands training-the-trainers, who in turn, introduce international subjects to many academic constituents, namely students. Since students rely on faculty as their primary source of information (Webb, Mayer, Pioche & Allen, 1999), academic institutions must focus on initiatives that facilitate and expedite the internationalization process. In view of this,

the former president of Duke, Nannerl Keohane, stated:

If we as a nation are going to become better prepared to deal with an increasingly interdependent world, then the front line has to be in our colleges and universities where we prepare students to become leaders in global enterprises, to serve in the Foreign Service, to be leaders of their communities who are sensitive to international issues (NAFSA Association of International Educators, 2004, p.29).

Although the internationalization debate has existed for many years in the academic arena, what remains debatable is how much international infusion is needed in existing courses, how internationalization initiatives should be enhanced, and how many faculty members should spend time overseas (Kwok & Arpan, 2002). Currently, there is a proliferation of short-term study tours taking place during summer, winter, and spring breaks and these are growing in importance at many institutions.

However, regardless of the proliferation and type of short-term foreign study tours, academic institutions are grappling with issues related to credibility, timing, duration, and structure. These issues are especially critical with short-term study abroad tours, which require more of a hard sell to colleges and accrediting bodies than do long-term, traditional study abroad tours.

In this article I describe and provide data on the Morehouse College International Spring Tour Model (see Figure 1). As a participant and faculty mentor for International Spring Tours to China, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Australia, South

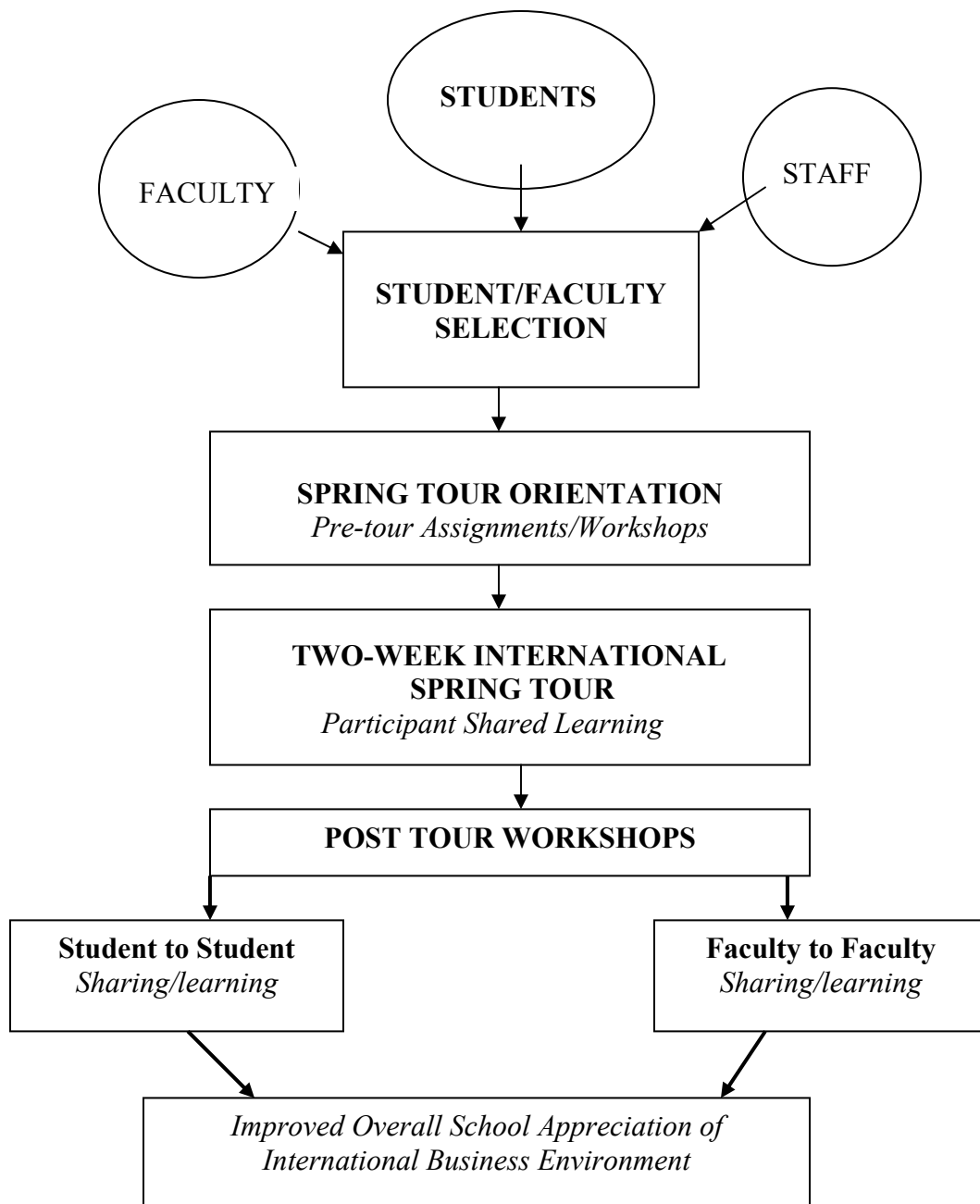


Figure 1. Overview to the Morehouse College International Spring Tour

Africa, Brazil, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Greece, and Morocco, I collected data on the experience.

Program Design

Since its inception in 1984 (Perry, 2000), the International Spring Tour at Morehouse College (Atlanta, Georgia) has provided opportunities for faculty and students to travel abroad. During spring break, approximately 25 students (90% business majors, 10% other disciplines), 5 faculty mentors and the Director of Career Counseling and Placement, participate in the program. Corporate sponsors underwrite the entire cost of the trip (“Preparing Future Business Leaders Today,” 1997, p. 96).

Faculty Selection

Faculty participants for an International Spring Tour should be chosen based on their infusion of internationalization into relevant courses, participation in internationalizing the college and curriculum, and involvement in student development. At Morehouse College, faculty are selected based on the relevance of their courses to internationalization, commitment to internationalizing the college and curriculum, involvement in student mentoring, and willingness to travel internationally. Typically, professors of international business, leadership and professional development, finance, accounting, management, and the Director of Career Counseling and Placement travel annually. There is also a rotating slot for a professor from another functional area related to business.

Student Selection

In promoting the program to students, announcements are posted in September encouraging students to submit their application. Interested students must have a minimum grade point average of 3.0, have the character of a diplomat of the college and country, obtain two faculty recommendations, and write a 10-page research paper on the host country’s political, economic, and cultural practices. The research topic, typically developed by the participating professor of international business, is a critical part of the application process. The paper and recommendations are submitted to the Director of Career Counseling and Placement before the Thanksgiving break in November. Examples of research topics include “China’s Role in the World Trade Organization” (2001), and “Ten Years and Counting: The Effect of NAFTA on the Economy of Canada and Mexico” (2004).

After the faculty participants and Director of Career Counseling and Placement assess the students’ research papers, character, and recommendations, students are notified in December regarding their status. Selected students are advised to obtain passports, visas if necessary, and spending cash during the Christmas break and be prepared to attend mandatory weekly workshops beginning in January.

Pre-Departure Workshops

In January, students begin attending pre-departure workshops with the Director of Career Counseling and Placement and faculty participants. During the workshops, the faculty and students share information from their research about the host countries’ economy, political structure, and culture, and is briefed on professionalism, decorum,

and etiquette. Additional information related to the host countries' culture is disseminated from Culture Grams; an annual report that covers the history, religion, languages, greetings, gestures, holidays, etc. of many countries. To further bolster the academic perspective, students have to write a 5-page critique from Edward T. Hall's (1960) classic, "The Silent Language in Overseas Business," and be prepared to incorporate the silent language of time, space, agreement, friendship and material possessions into their diaries while in the host countries.

At the pre-departure workshops, students also prepare and rehearse a 20-min, memorized presentation about the history of Morehouse College and its relationship with respective corporate sponsors, which will be presented in the host countries.

Host Country Site Visits

Once in the host country, pre-arranged workshops with corporate sponsors such as Citibank, Chase Bank, A.T. Kearney, Deloitte and Touche, Disney, Cargill, British Petroleum, and Ralston Purina take place. At the workshops, the group learns about challenges and opportunities facing corporate executives (local and expatriates) from the host country's perspective. Issues related to banking practices, product and promotional adaptation, consumer behavior, and management styles are often discussed. After learning about the companies' activities, the students deliver the 20-minute presentation about Morehouse College to corporate executives. During the presentation, some students personalize the script by incorporating their internships and/or offers provided by many of the corporate sponsors.

In addition to meeting with executives from multinational corporations,

the entourage visits academic institutions, such as the University of Beijing and Institute of European Studies (Paris), governmental agencies such as the Federal Reserve Bank of South Africa, and cultural sites such as the Eiffel Tower, Louvre, Vatican, Acropolis, and Great Wall of China. Students and faculty are also encouraged to shop at the "local" markets, restaurants, cafes, clubs, and attend social and sporting events.

Culminating Workshop

While still in the host country, at the end of the trip, professors of international business and leadership and professional development lead a culminating workshop, between students and faculty, based on Hall's silent language of time, space, agreement, friendship, and material possessions. By keeping a diary, and structuring the culminating workshop into the itinerary, professors and students share personal observations, colorful anecdotes and cross-cultural experiences found in the host country. The closing workshop helps address, and possibly cast off, some of the ethnocentrism and jingoism exhibited by students, professors, and corporate executives and adds synergy and academic credibility to the tour. In fact, the cumulating workshop assists faculty in infusing first-hand experiences into their future lectures and research.

Home College Workshops

Upon return to the college, faculty-to-faculty seminars are conducted at departmental and college-wide meetings by the tour faculty. These galvanizing seminars help promote a holistic approach to internationalization and foster the value of infusing an international perspective into the college, curriculum, faculty, and students. In

addition, the seminars help encourage other faculty to participate in the International Spring Tour, attend international conferences, seek foreign exchange programs, such as Fulbright Scholarships, and look for ways to internationalize their courses.

Student-to-student workshops are conducted in the international business class, leadership and professional development class, and at other venues aimed at prospective study-abroad students and the college-wide student body. Through dialogues and panel discussions, led by returning students, other students gain insight about the importance of academic travel from their peers. These insightful workshops help spread the importance of internationalization into the larger student body and aid in stirring student interest in the International Spring Tour, study-abroad programs, international internships, and international jobs. One International Spring Tour participant, who worked in London with J.P. Morgan stated, "The fact that I had this experience caused me to seek out an international career" (Perry, 2000, p. 7).

Conclusion

Developing and implementing an International Spring Tour, as an experiential, professional development, educational initiative, helps train-the-trainers to better teach the international dimension of their respective courses. A short-term International Spring Tour is extremely beneficial to faculty members, irrespective of discipline, who lack an international background but seek experience that will help them internationalize their courses. At Morehouse College, even though the International Spring Tour faculty are from the business department, returning faculty are better adept at integrating culture, history, geography, foreign languages, art,

aesthetics, religion, economics, politics, and law into their lectures and research. Moreover, regardless of discipline, a well-designed International Spring Tour enhances the connection between liberal arts and various academic disciplines: a cornerstone of liberal arts institutions.

Relying solely on the development and implementation of an International Spring Tour is no panacea nor will it solve the daunting internationalization challenges most schools face. According to Aranda and Golen (1991):

The development of truly effective international programs does not lend itself to a single approach or a simple solution. Programs will continue to be dependent on a combination of competent faculty, as well as internationally oriented leadership from the administration, and interaction with and support from the international business community (p. 4).

Even though foreign exchange programs have traditionally been the major method of internationalizing the faculty (Shooshtari & Fleming, 1990), their longer duration, disruption of one's lifestyle and responsibilities, and a nebulous tenure and reward system, have caused many faculty to be indifferent to foreign exchange programs. Moreover, the events of September 11th, along with travel warnings issued by the U.S. Department of State, have caused some colleges and universities to declare a moratorium on extended academic travel for faculty and students. For example, March 2004 was the first International Spring Tour to resume after Morehouse College lifted a post-September 11th travel moratorium.

Teaching students, with first-hand, international experiences, is essential if the United States is going to continue to prepare students who can compete in and cooperate with a global community. Moreover,

awareness of global issues must be taught to students by progressive professors and fostered by institutions of higher learning. As former Duke president, Nannerl Keohane stated:

Our country would be much improvised if we allowed ourselves to fall back into isolationism and xenophobia. It will be particularly important for us in the years ahead to have students who can speak a variety of languages and know the cultures of many different countries in order for our nation to take its place as one of the leading countries in building a stronger ...and more peaceful world” (NAFSA Association of International Educators, 2004, p.29).

A creative International Spring Tour is one of many academic experiences that can help shed some of the ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and jingoism exhibited by professors and students. As the intellectual and driving force of academic institutions, faculty must be encouraged to participate in a variety of internationalization initiatives, such as academic travel, and be rewarded accordingly. Training-the-trainers, with first-hand, international experiences is essential if the United States is going to remain a competitive leader in global business and a diplomatic leader in international relations.

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