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THE COLLEGIATE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE: CRITERIA FOR SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCE ABROAD PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Study abroad programs and other international experiences provide the means to enrich the collegiate curriculum and develop the whole person approach to education. The outcomes of an educational experience in an international setting are highly dependent upon the extent to which the participant in the experience has been prepared for it. This article identifies and explains a set of ten criteria for successful involvement in international experience programs. Successful study abroad programs do not just happen. To get the most out of these experiences participants must be goal oriented, focused, resourceful, management oriented, culturally wise, perceptive, and ready for new experiences as well as capable of developing an international mind-set. An international experience is a worthy educational tool. However, it must be approached with a clear set of criteria to judge its potential value.

In 1982, a plea for world peace was made by eleven-year-old Samantha Smith in a letter to Soviet Union leader Yuri Andropov. That letter earned her a trip to the Soviet Union and an opportunity to better understand Russia and other related cultures. Unfortunately, her life was tragically taken away in a plane crash just three years later. In her memory, the Samantha Smith Memorial Exchange Program was established, to increase mutual understanding between young people and undergraduate students of the United States, countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union through educational and cultural exchanges (Gelb,

1990). Such exchange programs and others have helped numerous students gain an international perspective that could not have been taught in the classroom.

An international experience abroad is a part of the international education many institutions and universities both domestically and internationally are trying to administer. International education is defined as a variety of activities and programs designed to encourage the flow of ideas and people across cultural and geographic boundaries (Mitzel, Best & Rabinowitz, 1982). The central goal of

international education is the ability to produce graduates with perspectives that are global in scope (Pickert, 1992). Studying abroad is one facet of an international education.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present a philosophical explanation of the importance of an international experience for students at the collegiate level, and to identify criteria for successful experience abroad programs.

The Criteria

Studying abroad is a phenomenon that comes over a person and changes that person forever. A country, its people, and its culture all have an

amazing effect on any one who has studied abroad. Perceptions are changed, thoughts challenged, and most important, a more worldly perspective is garnered. An international experience provides cultural awareness, improves communication abilities, and increases foreign language skills (Opper, Teichler & Carlson, 1990).

Despite all that is learned while abroad, problems do arise; that is why it is crucial to have a clear understanding of what might happen in an international experience program. Table 1 is a summary of ten criteria that were derived from the literature and the authors' experience, and are considered necessary for a successful study abroad experience. Each criterion is then discussed.

Table 1

Criteria for successful study abroad programs.

Criterion	Importance
1. Set Goals	Realize your abilities, time-frame and set goals for what you want to accomplish.
2. Expectations	Be aware of your home and host university's expectations.
3. Focus Academic Pursuits	A much richer experience will be gained if your interests are focused.
4. Resources/Contacts	Take advantage of the resources both while in your home and host country.
5. Financial Management	Learn to budget; money matters when you're away for an extended period of time.
6. Culture Preparation	Learn customs and the dos and don'ts of the country you're traveling to.
7. Identify Perceptions	Realize how you may be perceived and check your own perceptions of the host country.
8. Language Training	If you're not fluent, learn some language. A working vocabulary is extremely helpful.
9. Communications	Realize we all communicate differently and that open communication is essential; both talking and listening.
10. An Open Mind	A positive attitude will only enhance your experience. Flexibility is key!

Set Goals

Goal setting is a powerful process. Webster's dictionary (1990) defines a goal as "an end that one strives to attain." According to Covey, Merrill and Merrill (1994, p. 136), goal setting is the process of translating visions into achievable, actionable things. Carrying out measurable, specific and time-bound goals is important, and involves recognizing one's abilities, limitations and the overall structure of the international program.

It is important to fully understand the type of international experience one participates in, the length of stay, language requirements, and current status when setting goals. An international experience can be classified based on its purpose. Purpose includes study abroad, work abroad, cultural exchange, and internships.

The purpose of an international experience drives the goals that are written, but it is equally important to consider language and length of stay. Goal setting is important regardless of the program structure. Goals provide direction and purpose for what one wants to achieve (Tritz, 1990, 1994).

Expectations

Goals are set with the expectation that positive changes will occur (Covey et al., 1994, p. 138). Expectations go hand-in-hand with goals. To achieve each goal set by either the program or the student, certain expectations must be met.

Expectations for study abroad programs exist, but are often not communicated very effectively either in written or verbal form. If goals are to be achieved, then what is expected is a major piece of the puzzle. Granted, circumstances are different in every situation, but overall goals must be constructed with realistic outcomes in mind. If students expect one thing and something else occurs then objectives are not met. Therefore, we must be careful when stipulating certain ideas to reach program goals and clearly outline what is expected by all those involved.

An awareness of program expectations is important for effectively utilizing time and resources. According to Covey et al. (1994, p. 223), when seminar participants were asked how much time was spent in their organizations dealing with the effects of unclear expectations, they said approximately 60 percent.

International experiences can be similar. For example, international students often expect to have jobs to help support their time at U.S. universities, but find the process of obtaining a work permit extremely difficult and time consuming.

Focus Academic Pursuits

Studying abroad usually occurs during the junior year when most students have some direction in their academic program. Areas of specialization are often required by most departments during the junior year. Most benefit will be gained if one's academic program is focused because goals will often mirror what one wants to achieve academically.

It is amazing how having a focus will benefit an individual. Granted, diversity in course work and gaining new perspectives are important, but it is also important to look at the big picture and where one will be in five or ten years, so as to gain the most from an international experience.

Resources/Contacts

Utilizing the resources for a study abroad experience can be overwhelming considering the information that exists. Resources both at home and while abroad are important information sources.

The study abroad center on a university campus is a logical place to start. These centers have information on tourism, culture, entertainment, restaurants, youth hostels, and many other topics. This service offers this same information for nearly 130 countries world-wide.

The world-wide-web is another information-packed place to gather details. One can get a passport, contact an embassy, or find out tips on what to pack, directly through the Internet. The Internet is a gold mine of information just waiting to be tapped.

Another resource is students from the country one is planning to visit. Exchange programs offer the opportunity to meet and interact with those students, and get a better feel of the language and customs, and to taste some of their food.

Tapping into those students who were past participants will provide tremendous insight as well. They know what to expect, what the food is like, what the people are like, what may be most helpful, and what it is like to be an American in an international setting. One student who participated in an exchange to the Ukraine felt that meeting with past participants was very beneficial because it gave insight into what the country and its people were really like (Tritz, 1996).

Financial Management

Financing a study abroad experience can be an intimidating task considering the cost of airline tickets, room and board, and all the necessities on one's packing list. However, careful budgeting should alleviate money shortages.

A monthly itemized budget works best because it clearly outlines one's expenditures over the course of a month. Certain programs require total payment of everything, from airline tickets to food, prior to departure; whereas other programs require participants to only pay for items such as airline tickets, insurance, and other incidental fees prior to departure. Once in the country, a monthly budget will help to better balance possible income and expenditure. A budget should include items such as room and board, health insurance, books and supplies, entertainment and activities, souvenirs, local travel, incidental fees, and pocket money. In

addition, it is always recommended to exchange money at a bank. Exchanging money on the black market is, first of all, illegal in many countries, and secondly, it is dangerous.

Many of the items listed above will vary depending on the program, the country, and the lifestyle of the participant. Fixed costs for a program are travel to and from the host country, food, and housing. These are essential wherever one's experience takes one. From there on, it is a matter of the lifestyle one chooses.

One should take into account possible unforeseen or unavoidable events. A golden rule when traveling abroad is to take an extra \$500, if possible. Emergencies can occur in the blink of an eye and leave one in a precarious situation. Wiring money is an option in some parts of the world, but not others. A good budget always has a little flexibility built in.

Cultural Preparation

According to Applebaum et al. (1973, p. 86), culture is the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies of status, religion, timing, role expectations, spatial relations, and concepts of self, the universe, and the relationships acquired by a large group of people over the course of time.

It is important to learn about culture shock and how one will be affected by it. One's first experience can bring on feelings of homesickness, certain illnesses due to the change in food and water, and other possible things (Tritz, 1990). However, with experience, a new country or new situation is handled better because psychologically one is better prepared. Our bodies do not always adjust with experience, but our mind-set is more open and the adjustment period gets smoother with more travel experience (Tritz, 1996). It is important to realize how studying abroad affects people. According to Hawks (1994), the level of enthusiasm is highest during the first month. Everything is new, one is new to the culture and the town. However, that feeling soon wears off as time goes on; the newness of the experience

wears off, and sometimes homesickness sets in (Hawks, 1994, p. 63).

It is important to find pertinent information such as cultural dos and don'ts, eating habits, food preferences, drinking customs, and personal space. Even more important, one should have a complete physical and the proper immunizations, note allergies, and be cognizant of health insurance, including policies.

Identify Perceptions

Applebaum et al (1973, p. 88) indicate that human perceptions should give us an accurate picture of our social environment. Unfortunately, they seldom do, because various cultural elements prejudice the meaning we attach to social stimuli. Perceptions will vary with each individual and how we view the world. Several common views are ethnocentrism, the world view, absolute value system, stereotypes, and prejudices.

According to Applebaum et al. (1973, pp. 89-90), ethnocentrism is the "unconscious tendency to view and judge other people by our own customs and standards. Our ethnocentric perception hampers intercultural communication because we are unable to view objectively customs or beliefs that differ from our own." Understanding why a society does what it does is more important. Different isn't good or bad, it is just different; therefore, judging a society based on one's own values is not appreciating fully the country and culture one is trying to experience.

Stereotypes and prejudices are described as a set of attitudes applied to a person or group of people based on their class or position in society (Applebaum et al., 1973, p. 91). Stereotypes and prejudices are often fueled by the media. Television serves as one very popular way of transmitting a view of what is happening around the world. The perceptions gained by viewing selected television shows lead to stereotypes and generalizations for an entire country. The experience of being different can have both positive and negative effects: positive in the

sense that one is often showered with attention and privileges that are not often granted to others; negative by means of verbal abuse and various forms of harassment (Tritz, 1996).

It is important to identify perceptions of people from one's host country as well as have a sense of self-awareness by knowing what perceptions one has of the country one will be in. From politics to lifestyles, people around the world are perceived in different ways. Being different is not good or bad, it's just different; therefore, it is important that each student going abroad is cognizant of various world views and attitudes.

Language Training

Many of the study abroad opportunities offered under the auspices of International Agriculture Programs at Iowa State University do not require fluency in a second language, because many of the classes and tours offer translators to accompany students. However, this should not be seen as a crutch. Having some language skills in preparation for a study abroad experience is very beneficial.

In the Slovak Student Exchange nearly every student wished more language training had been available prior to the experience. Students lived with host families and nearly all of them felt that more language training would have made the transition easier. If language fluency is not required for a program, it is important for three reasons to learn some language.

First, attempting to speak and communicate with people of a different culture will show an initiative and a willingness to assimilate and learn about the host country. A lift of the eyebrows and a smile from the person one is communicating with will be a good indication that trying is important. Second, language training will be extremely beneficial when traveling within a city, or country, shopping, locating and eating at restaurants, and in many other situations. This ability gives one a feeling of independence. Finally, language skills can be extremely helpful when one finds oneself in precarious situations.

Communication

When we interact with people from other cultures as we travel abroad, we are engaging in intercultural communication. According to Applebaum et al. (1973, p. 99), intercultural communication occurs when the speaker or communicator is from one culture and the listener or audience is from another. We communicate differently, and it is important to realize that communication in settings other than our own can be challenging as well as rewarding.

We communicate through the use of verbal, non-verbal and listening techniques. The words used in one context may have a different meaning in another context or situation, even if translated. Some words in one language may not exist in another language.

Non-verbal communication consists of facial expressions, actions, and mannerisms. It is a common experience among people who travel to find difficulty in interpreting the facial expressions of different people. Such expressions as shaking heads from side to side as an indication of “no” is interpreted differently in various parts of the world. Therefore, understanding and being cognizant of non-verbal cues will help in understanding the verbal communication and enhance listening.

It takes a lot of practice to become a good listener. In an international setting, listening skills are extremely important; getting directions to the bus stop, listening to the waiter describe the menu or listening to a lecture on milk production are all examples of when listening is important. A different language will challenge everyone’s listening skills because it really takes a concentrated effort on the part of the listener.

An Open Mind

An international experience is a beneficial and worthwhile endeavor, and the correct attitude is important for having a high quality experience. A positive attitude will benefit a person

tremendously. An international experience offers potential growth in terms of technical skill, culture, history, politics, language, geography and so much more. The ability to absorb the experience is only enhanced with the right frame of mind.

One should take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself; that is the only way to really experience a culture. It is all about risk-taking. One is taking a risk just by stepping outside of one’s own culture, so it is important to build on each and every experience while overseas. An open mind and a positive attitude will not only set the stage, but will also enhance the overall international experience.

Educational Importance

Today there is recognition of the fact that there is a direct connection between educational and informational exchange and economic development (Davis, 1995). International experiences provide this reciprocity of information, and the insight into another country’s cultural system. Internationalization is only as important as we make it. Universities need to commit both academically and financially to study abroad programs.

The story of Samantha Smith portrays how someone so young had a vision of some day understanding a culture so unlike her own. Her efforts are still seen today, and it has provided an opportunity for many students to see firsthand the changes sweeping over Eastern Europe. The journal entries of the many students who have been to Eastern Europe and other places around the world will attest to the tremendous amount of information gained from an experience abroad. Often one only needs to look into the eyes of exchange students as they talk about their trip to realize that for them it was an experience of a lifetime.

Studying abroad is a phenomenon that comes over one and changes one forever. A phenomenon is a unique and unusual experience for each individual, just like each trip abroad. An international experience is a worthy

educational tool and as educators and administrators, it is our responsibility to ensure that the next generation is awarded this opportunity.

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