



The Development of Study Abroad Programs in Culturally Difficult Situations

Dr. Jeffrey P. Hill
Natural Sciences Department
Western New Mexico University
Silver City, NM 88061
jeffret12357@hotmail.com

Abstract

The benefits of study abroad to develop cultural understanding have been clearly stated by numerous world leaders and academics, yet cultural norms of certain cultures make these programs difficult to develop. This is particularly true for women from Islamic countries.

To development a study abroad program for women at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates, focus groups with the students and their parents were used to determine the critical issues that needed to be addressed. These focus groups identified five main issues that needed to be addressed: appropriate chaperones, availability of female doctors for students at the study abroad site, halal food availability, appropriate housing and appropriate oversight of students. Solutions to each problem were developed in consultation with the parents of students, resulting in a study abroad policy that was approved by the University and the Minister of Education. From the first trip to Scotland in the summer of 2003, the program grew to 11 different study abroad trips in 2006-2007. These trips not only increased cultural understanding of the students going on them, but also locals in the countries they visit who interacted with the students. Only through understanding the specific cultural norms and issues can study abroad programs be developed for students from culturally restrictive countries.

Key Words: Culture, Islamic, Study Aboard, United Arab Emirates, Zayed University



Introduction:

Lack of cultural understanding is one of the major contributors to international disagreements, mistrust and conflicts (Johnson and Mulholland, 2006). As the world moves towards a global economy the need for cultural understanding between the nations of the world becomes increasingly important (Henthorne et al., 2001). The importance of study abroad programs for promoting cultural understanding has been clearly stated by every U.S. administration since Harry Truman (Knight, 2004), but was perhaps best articulated by Colin Powell in 2004: "The more we know about each other, the more we learn about each other, the more we engage on differences that we have between our societies and between our social systems and between our political points of view, the better off we are. The more dialogue we have at every level, and especially at the academic level, where opinion-makers are located- - - the better off we are." This clearly demonstrates that study abroad programs help promote cultural understanding, but these programs can be difficult to develop in some countries. This is particularly true for women from Arabic countries who often are more culturally constrained in what they are allowed to do. This paper chronicles how a study abroad program was developed for Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates and should give others insights into how to plan and develop study abroad programs in similar culturally difficult situations.

Issue Identification and Program Development

The key to developing study abroad programs for culturally restrictive populations is the identification of the specific cultural issues that need to be addressed. The best way to do this is through consultation with a broad cross section of the parents of the student population you want to take on study abroad. It is necessary to work with parents in addition to students, because parents in most



cultures are more conservative than their children and are the ones that decide what is acceptable for their children to do.

To develop the study abroad program for Zayed University, a university just for women in the United Arab Emirates, a student club (The International Travel and Culture Club) was developed which set the development of a study abroad program as one of its goals. Through the club students were identified that had strong interest in study abroad. In the club, discussions were started with students about the specific issues that would arise for a study abroad program. This generated a target list of issues to discuss with their parents.

University officials were also met with to identify specific issues of concern for the university and to determine which administrators and government officials would have to approve the program. In many countries you need the approval of key governmental officials, in this case the Minister of Education, to get study abroad programs approved. One advantage of working directly with students was that many of the students had strong political connections, allowing us to directly contact with the Minister of Education. This contact, made it clear that the Minister would support our study abroad program if we could find solutions to all the issues that arose concerning the program and clearly addressed these in our program proposal.

Five main areas of concern were identified: appropriate chaperones, health concerns, food concerns, housing and appropriate oversight of students. With this list of issues as a starting point, parents of students were invited to the university for an open discussion of the issues surrounding the development of the study abroad program for their daughters. As many parents as possible were encouraged to attend the meetings to get as broad a cross section of the population as possible. Students who were from more conservative families were specifically asked if their parents would be willing to attend. The goal was to develop a study abroad program that any student could attend and so input from



the most conservative parents was important. Students led the discussions with the parents. This was for two reasons; most of the discussion was in Arabic which I do not speak well and being from the culture students would be better accepted by the parents.

The parents suggested that their issues would be different for different study abroad sites and wanted to know what sort of places were being considered. We had already picked a site for our first study abroad program assuming we could get the program approved. In picking a site we had tried to identify a place that would be highly acceptable for students to go, but also be in a culture that was significantly different than their own. We chose the Al Maktoum Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies located in Dundee, Scotland. This institute is funded by the ruling family of Dubai and hence it would be viewed as highly acceptable. The institute also runs a six week program in the summer in cultural understanding that examines cultural differences between the Middle East and Europe.

Choosing an appropriate site for your first study abroad trip is critically important. If the first study abroad trip is a success it will pave the way for more trips and expansion of the program in the future. It is very important to choose a site that parents are comfortable with and that students will enjoy. After the program is established and parents feel comfortable with the way trips are running, trips to less acceptable sites can be developed.

Appropriate chaperones were a major concern for most of the parents. The more conservative parents would only accept female chaperones as expected and wanted the chaperones to be nationals. The number of chaperones was also a concern. Our initial model was for a trip taking 20 students with three female chaperones to supervise the students. Three chaperones had been chosen so there would be an extra chaperone to travel with a student if a student had to return home early from the trip for health or other reasons. We had already lined up three national women from the university, one of which highly respected by the



students and parents. At the mention of our proposed chaperones a number of parents indicated that they had total trust in chaperones chosen and had no problems sending their daughter on the trip. Choosing the right chaperones is critically important to the success of any study abroad program.

With any study abroad program there are a number of health issues that need to be addressed and there are some fairly standard things that are done to address these. We had already had in our study abroad program policy proposal that each student would be provided with travel health insurance for the country they were traveling to and would be required to fill out a health history questionnaire identifying any preexisting conditions, required medications or drug allergies they had. These forms were to be filled out by their doctor and would have his or her contact information for incase of emergency. Where necessary, forms would be translated from Arabic to English. Medical treatment consent forms for each student would also be filled out and signed by the parents. These forms included contact information for three different family members to be contacted in the event of a medical emergency on the study abroad trip. Each chaperone on the study abroad trip would carry copies of the travel health insurance, health history forms and medical treatment consent forms for all the students and chaperones. In addition, a primary emergency contact at the university identified who would keep a copies of all the forms and could be contacted in an emergency. For emergencies, it was arranged for each chaperone to have an international cell phone. An issue that arose was what hospital students would be taken in an emergency and if female doctors would be available. To meet this concern, we add to our policy that we would identify the closest hospital to where the students would be staying and make sure that female doctors were available. We would also make sure that the chaperones had the address and contact information for the chosen hospital and parents would also receive this information. Initial contact with a least one female doctor at the hospital would be made and to let her know when our student group would be in the area and make sure she would be available during this time. The medical histories of any students with medical



conditions of concern would also be faxed to the doctor along with the contact information for these student's doctors in the UAE before the students arrived.

There was one food concern that had been expected, which was whether halal food would be available at the study abroad site. Halal means "permissible" in Arabic and refers mostly to how animals are slaughtered, but there are some meats (e.g., pork and fanged beasts) that can not be eaten. In our policy it stated that a hotel would be chosen that could provide students with halal food.

Housing was another issue. Parents wanted to be sure that the students would be supervised on all outings. To meet this concern a hotel was chosen outside of town so students could not easily go off on their own. This issue was also addressed in our student rules, stating that no student was allowed to travel anywhere without a chaperone.

Appropriate oversight of students was also important to the parents. This was accomplished in a number of ways. In addition, to our three chaperones, three students were designated to be assistant chaperones to help keep track of the students and make sure they were not doing things they were not suppose to. A clear set of rules was developed for students that set out the expectations for students on study abroad and activities that were forbidden. Clear guidelines were also set out for how the chaperones should handle various emergency situations, for example a lost student.

In consultation with the parents solutions were found to all of their major concerns. Some things that were expected to be major concerns did not turn out to be. For example, more conservative parents would require that their daughters pray in a mosque; it turned out that although this was preferable it was not necessary. There were also concerns that funding for the program would be a difficult to obtain, but the parents were sure this would not be a problem.



The policy for the study abroad program was quickly approved by the university and the Minister of Education. From the first trip to Scotland in the summer of 2003, the program grew to 11 different study abroad trips in 2006-2007 which went to seven different countries. The success of the program and its rapid expansion to other countries was the direct result of strong study abroad policy that was developed for the program. The policies developed directly addressed the concerns to parents and each successful trip showed that policies worked, allowing further expansion of the program.

Conclusions

Most study abroad programs occur between the U.S. and Europe and less than one percent of study abroad programs involve more culturally difficult sites like the Middle East (Obst et al., 2007). We are at a time in history when there is great need for cultural understanding between the Middle East and the west. If one of the goals of study abroad is to promote cultural understanding (Johnson and Mulholland, 2006), then there is a need to increase the number of study abroad programs coming from and going to the middle east. This can only be accomplished by understanding the culture and the unique requirements for study abroad program development.

Guides to the development of study abroad programs tend to focus on education aspects of the program, logistics and basic student safety, but do not cover how to deal with cultural barriers to program development (Form on Education Abroad, 2008). To develop study abroad programs in culturally difficult situations you must be able to identify the specific cultural issues or barriers to the program. This is best done by meeting with the parents of the students who are the ones who will ultimately decide whether their children can go on study abroad. In situations where you are not from the culture that you are trying to develop a study abroad program for, discussions with parents will be more effective if you can get someone from the their culture to lead the discussions. The key to developing a successful program is making sure that acceptable solutions to all parental



Presented at the 17th Annual Convention of the Global Awareness Society International, May 2008, San Francisco, CA, USA

concerns are found. If your program is supported by the parents then university and governmental approvals of the program will probably not be difficult.



References

Form on Education Abroad (2008) Standards of good practice for education abroad.

Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, 27

Henthorne, T. L., Miller, M. M. and Hudson, T. W. (2001) Building and positioning successful study-abroad programs a “hands on” approach. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 12(4), 49-62.

Johnson, V. C. and Mulholland, J. (2006). Open doors, secure borders: advantage of

education abroad for public policy. *International Educator*, May-June, 4-7.

Knight, J. (2004) Internationalization remodeled: definition, approaches and rationales.

Journal of Studies in International Education. 8(1), 5-31.

Obst, D., Bhandari, R. and Witherell, S. (2007) Meeting America’s global education

challenge: current trends in U.S. study abroad & the impact of strategic diversity initiative. *Institute of International Education* 1, 1-31.