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# Implementing Successful Study Abroad Programs: Strategies and Recommendations for Faculty Members in the Social Sciences

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## Abstract

This paper presents recommendations for faculty mentors interested in conducting a study abroad program in the social sciences. The recommendations discussed in this paper aim to support faculty in pre-departure planning, during the study abroad experience, and after the study abroad experience concludes. The strategies presented in this paper aim to enhance the quality of the study abroad program, while creating an enjoyable, stimulating, and memorable experience for the students and faculty mentor.

## Keywords:

Preparing faculty, study abroad, cultural immersion, orientation meetings

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## Introduction

The American Association of Colleges and Universities recognizes the importance of integrating global learning into university curricula and university experiences through study abroad (Hovland, 2009). Study abroad is a complex and dynamic topic with many salient and practical implications for society as the world becomes more globalized. Consequently, study abroad programs are an important component of undergraduate students' academic training and competencies. Many employers expect their incoming employees to have global competencies that include an understanding of people from other cultures who have different traditions, values, norms, religions, and food habits (Holmes et al., 2015). Lane (2003) reported that US-Americans' knowledge of the world outside the United States is limited and must be improved in order for US-American universities, businesses, and organizations to remain competitive in the world.

Study abroad falls into the category of high-impact practices that enhance students' learning outcomes related to diversity and global learning (Kuh, 2008). Traveling to other countries, in general, provides stimulation, challenge, and increased curiosity toward diverse ways of living (Strange & Gibson, 2017). In addition, studying abroad has been shown to increase students' global awareness and self-awareness (Young et al., 2015). Study abroad programs enable students to experience an interconnected world and embrace differences rather than adhere to ethnocentric values and beliefs (Mulaney, 2017). With the recent refugee crisis in Syria, Iran, Ukraine, and Turkey, as well as political unrest, natural disasters, and a global pandemic, it is of paramount importance that recent graduates have a greater understanding of the diversity of people from different cultures. In the future, students will be confronted with situations where they will have to work with individuals and families from various countries around the world.

Moreover, the number of study abroad programs has increased in recent years, and these programs are gradually becoming increasingly popular. Numerous studies have been published on the effects and consequences of study abroad programs. The results of these studies have been overwhelmingly positive, commendable, and noteworthy. More specifically, the empirical literature has demonstrated that study abroad programs can have a significant impact on students' personal, social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional life

(Medora et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that study abroad programs are not created equal, and the impact of these programs is often contingent on a number of factors such as preparedness of the faculty leader, program structure, and curriculum.

## **Role of Faculty Mentors in Study Abroad**

Faculty mentors who conduct study abroad programs have the role of delivering an exciting, memorable, intellectually stimulating, meaningful program that may be the highlight of students' education. One would assume that because of the demand and popularity of study abroad programs there would be published research on considerations for faculty leaders in developing and leading a study abroad program. However, there is limited scholarship on how a faculty leader can prepare and implement effective study abroad programs in the social sciences.

Learning content is an important consideration for the delivery of a study abroad program, but logistics and structure of the program are important as well. Faculty leaders should be familiar with factors that impact the way students experience the study abroad program, as well as problematic issues that may arise for students. Furthermore, in light of the current global pandemic, there are also a number of safety considerations of which faculty should be cognizant as they develop their global learning excursions. From our experiences, if faculty leaders are better prepared, the study abroad program is likely to be more successful for students and less problematic for the faculty leader.

## **Objective**

The objective of this paper is to outline specific recommendations for faculty leaders interested in conducting a study abroad program in the social sciences. This article is a follow-up to a brief article (Medora & Roy, 2017) that discussed organizing, planning, and conducting a three-week, short-term study abroad program for undergraduate students. In addition, Eckert et al. (2013) discuss important topics to consider in building a study abroad program for business students. The current article adopts some of the recommendations presented in the existing research, while adding our own experiences and further considerations for social science programs, from pre-trip planning to post-trip reflections. Recommendations discussed in this article were compiled

after several years of experience, planning, organizing, and conducting study abroad programs in various countries.

Overall, this article addresses a gap in the literature by presenting important tactical information for day-to-day problems that may arise when a study abroad program is still in the “thinking stages” and in the process of coming to fruition. Strategies to respond to these challenges or to prevent them from occurring are discussed. Recommendations for faculty leaders who are interested in initiating a study-abroad course in the social sciences are outlined in three parts. The first section details considerations during the “Pre-Study Abroad” phase. The second section outlines recommendations for faculty “During the Study Abroad Program”. The last section includes “Post-Study Abroad” recommendations. Many social science study abroad programs require students to interact with others in the context of sensitive, personal, and intimate issues. The authors of this article have experience conducting study abroad programs in the social sciences, namely child development and family science. Although this article is grounded in social science study abroad programming, we believe that many of the recommendations presented here can be relevant to global education programs in other fields of study.

## **Pre-Study Abroad**

### **Faculty Assessment of Their Potential to be a Faculty Leader**

The faculty leader is vital to the success of a study abroad program and should assess their own potential to develop and lead a program. The faculty leader should be comfortable working with all types of students, and they should enjoy having them around at all times. They should enjoy being students’ tour guide, instructor, “mother hen”, and “disciplinarian”. The faculty member should be able to connect with the students, empathize with them, and have a good rapport with them. In addition, the faculty member will be the main lifeline and source of support, assurance, and information for the duration of the study abroad experience (Koernig, 2007), making them a critical factor in how students experience the program.

Serving as a study abroad faculty leader requires considerable time to plan, develop, and market the program, often requiring more time and effort than teaching a regular class (Eckert et al., 2013). The planning, development, recruitment, and execution of the program should be given careful

consideration, and they should be professionally done. As Eckert et al. (2013) specified: “In organizing and conducting a study abroad program, one must never lose sight that the objective of the trip is to provide an academic cross-cultural experience rather than a group vacation” (p. 455). Thus, potential faculty leaders should assess their own readiness to develop and lead such an experience.

### Selecting a Study Abroad Destination

One of the first tasks that a faculty leader should consider is choosing an appropriate destination that is likely to appeal to students and be a feasible destination. Based on our experiences, it can be favorable to students if the program is conducted in several adjoining cities, opposed to a single destination. Visiting multiple locations allows the students to experience different parts of the country, including cities as well as the countryside. It is crucial that the faculty leader visit the destination and is familiar with the layout of the cities prior to taking students for the study abroad program. The following are questions that the faculty mentor should consider when deciding on a study abroad location:

Is the country politically stable?

How are women and gender diverse individuals viewed and treated in the country?

Do people living in the country value and respect people from all ethnic groups?

Is the country safe in terms of robbery, assault, and theft?

If an emergency should arise, does the country have adequate medical facilities to treat students?

Are there COVID-19 health and safety protocols in the travel destination?

How far is the international airport from the destination?

Where will students eat, and is the food safely prepared and stored?

Where will the students sleep, and how many students will be to a room?

Will there be clean linens available to the students?

Is there proper air conditioning and heating available?

Are there clean showers and toilets?

Does the location present an opportunity for students to achieve the learning outcomes?

Overall, these are questions that should be considered so that a faculty leader can tailor the preparation process for students. However, if the faculty leader has not visited the destination, they may not know what amenities are offered or not offered.

### Considerations for an Organizational Approach

The faculty leader is responsible for deciding who will organize and arrange the itinerary, guest speakers, visits to museums, and other accommodations for the study abroad program. There is a variety of approaches that can be used to conduct a study abroad program, as Eckert et al. (2013) describe. First, the “self-organized” approach can be used if the faculty leader chooses to organize the logistical issues and program details. With this approach, the faculty mentor is responsible for the advertising, recruiting, registration, arranging hotel reservations, booking the excursions, providing counseling if needed, and enforcing proper student conduct. Even during a global pandemic, global unrest, financial insecurity, or natural disasters, the faculty mentor is responsible for the students and must make decisions if unexpected events occur. Some faculty elect this option because it may be cheaper for students. However, there are various universities that do not allow faculty to pursue this option.

Second, some faculty members use travel agents in the host country to organize the program and make reservations. In this case, the travel agent makes the necessary accommodations and arrangements for sightseeing in the country. Faculty members may face challenges if the travel agent does not understand the intentions and desired interactions for students in the program (e.g., wanting to visit a social service agency serving unhoused families). An additional challenge may arise if the travel agent goes out of business or moves to another location. If this occurs, the deposit, airfare, and program fees paid by the students may be gone.

Third, the faculty leader can use a university in the host country to assist with the program (Eckert et al., 2013). If there is a strong relationship with a partner university in the host country, the university will elect a committee to organize the study abroad program. Many universities also arrange for the students to live in their dormitories if the study abroad program is occurring over the summer or winter holidays (note that universities may not have space

in their dormitories while their school is in session). This option may be a challenge unless the faculty leader is from the host country or has a colleague at a partner institution who is willing to assist with the planning and organization of the program. However, faculty at a partner university may be more prepared to facilitate learning opportunities that are in line with the pedagogical goals of the study abroad program. Most programs in the social sciences have a focus on human relationships, social justice, and practices that directly impact the well-being of the public. Social science faculty should identify partner programs that share these values.

Finally, the faculty leader can use a ‘provider,’ who is a ‘third party’ person located in the destination country. The ‘provider’ recommends visits to attractions, suggests field trips, identifies guest speakers, recommends universities to visit, and arranges housing and meals. There are a number of benefits for using a ‘provider’, as they can assist faculty members on the ground if issues or challenges arise during the study abroad program. For example, when one of the authors led a study abroad trip to New Zealand, there was a thunderstorm that disrupted the group’s upcoming travel. The itinerary had to be shifted due to the treacherous weather conditions, and subsequently, the provider took care of rescheduling the airline reservations. Using a provider may be particularly useful if the faculty leader is new at conducting study abroad programs or if they are not familiar with the program destination(s). The amount of assistance and direction that is needed from the ‘provider’ can be decided by the faculty mentor. For instance, the provider could organize the entire program or a segment of the program. The ‘provider’ charges a small percent as a fee. We feel that the fee is worthwhile. One author of this paper uses ‘providers’ when conducting study abroad programs and has found them to be flexible, helpful, and cooperative. Even though there are benefits to using a ‘third party,’ some providers may not be as informed on the pedagogical goals of the program in order to arrange learning opportunities to help students meet the learning outcomes. Therefore, it is important for the provider and study abroad instructor to have regular communication so that the provider knows what is needed.

### Training Sessions for Faculty Leaders

Universities should consider providing training sessions to faculty leaders on how to conduct a study abroad program. Topics discussed in this

training session should include university specifics about recruitment of students, payment schedules, reimbursement of the deposit, deadlines for canceling the class, insurance coverage, organizational approach options, and safety and security considerations. In addition, university emergency procedures, emergency contact information, and information about the American embassy in the host country should be provided to students and their families. It may be beneficial if faculty leaders receive this training from the study abroad office on the university campus.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates that faculty understand health and safety norms and guidelines in the host country. Safety protocols for traveling to the destination (e.g., airline procedures) should also be researched and followed. Faculty should be educated on any health requirements for entering a different country, such as vaccinations, proof of negative virus tests, and face mask requirements.

### Being Faculty Leaders and Cultural Mentors

A critical aspect of the study abroad program is the faculty leader who will be planning, organizing, conducting, and participating in the study abroad program. The faculty leader needs to be sensitive, understanding, and approachable. These are people-centered qualities that faculty can model for students who are entering social science professions. Furthermore, the faculty leader should have a good bond, rapport, and connection with the students. The students should want to spend time with the faculty leader and enjoy being with them. The faculty leader also needs to convey a sense of knowledge, comfort, responsibility, and enthusiasm to the potential students; they are the students' lifeline for the duration of the program (Medora & Roy, 2017).

It is essential for the faculty leader to build good rapport with students enrolled in the study abroad program. Researchers have argued that there are three factors needed to establish connection: approach factors, personality factors, and homophily (Granitz et al., 2009; Koernig, 2007). Approach factors refer to the friendliness and approachability of the faculty leader. Personality factors refer to the compassion, empathy, and respect the faculty leader shows toward the students (Granitz et al., 2009). It is important to consider each student as an "individual," with a unique personality and personal circumstances. This will assist the faculty leader to better understand the



students and build a good rapport with them. Homophily, or homogeneity, refers to the fact that individuals are attracted to and bond with individuals who are similar to themselves. The faculty leader could bring out the common features and attributes of the students in the group and share specific issues about their own apprehensions and victories while traveling. If they do this, they may be more likely to bond with the students (Koernig, 2007).

In addition, faculty leaders should see themselves as cultural mentors, which includes engaging learners in continuous interaction pertaining to their cultural experiences, helping them to better understand the intercultural nature of specific activities and encounters, and providing them with explanations and feedback that is relevant to their level of intercultural development (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). This feedback allows students to understand and find meaning in their study abroad experiences and transfer these competencies gained from this experience into interactions with others in their own country. A faculty leader needs to be aware of their own intercultural competence and biases because this is likely to influence their mentoring style.

### The Itinerary Should Look Appealing

Planning and generating a stimulating, inviting, and interesting itinerary with colorful photos of the destination is vital. The itinerary should be appealing to students in a variety of majors on the university campus and should include a variety of activities. Students may be more interested in the study abroad opportunity if it includes a diverse set of excursions, including visits to museums, historical sites, schools, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and social service agencies. Learning opportunities in the community, when possible, should be provided to break up the monotony of lectures and allow the students to further understand and apply topics taught in class. The learning activities on the itinerary should clearly link back to the learning objectives of the course.

Eckert et al. (2013) specified that the itinerary should serve as a useful communication tool for the students who are interested in the trip. A specific itinerary provides students a perspective on what to expect as a part of the program. Many students share this itinerary with their parents, friends, and classmates. Thus, an effective itinerary includes the dates, places that the students will visit, iconic photographs of the cities that they will be visiting,

whether meal(s) are included, and in which city the students will spend the night.

## Recruitment of Students

Recruiting students for the program is one of the most challenging and time-consuming endeavors of a study abroad program. Even if the study abroad location is appealing to students, there may be certain challenges that make recruitment difficult (e.g., students' family circumstances, financial resources, students' religious holidays that coincide with program dates). The faculty leader should spend time talking to students and making announcements in different classes for recruitment. Faculty leaders in the social sciences can highlight opportunities for experiential learning with local community agencies, which may appeal to students pursuing careers in the social sciences. The program announcement should also be uploaded to different websites in the department and on the international educational website at the university as well. Eckert et al. (2013) remarked that the marketing of the study abroad program should be broken down into three steps: 1. Creating awareness and interest in the program; 2. Responding to queries and concerns from students; 3. Getting a firm commitment from the students.

It is important to note that just because students sign up for the program, this does not mean that they are all committed to participating in the program. In our experiences, we have found an attrition rate of approximately 50 percent. Some students overestimate their financial capabilities. After paying the initial deposit money, they realize they cannot pay the remaining funds, so they drop out. Other students have family circumstances that make it difficult for them to be away from family for a certain length of time. In addition, some students may need to cancel at the last minute because of factors related to COVID-19 (e.g. personal illness, illness of a family member). A contingency plan for those students and the reimbursement of funds already paid should be clearly articulated to students and their families. In all, faculty leaders should consider the demographics of their student population in terms of planning the timing and length of the trip, as this may impact the availability of students to travel.

## Orientation Meetings for the Program

Orientation meetings before departure serve students enrolled in the study abroad program to help reduce anxiety among them and their parents, as

well as to provide logistical information about the program. Parents, relatives, and friends are invited to attend the orientation meetings. These meetings are held on the home campus a few weeks or months before departure. During the orientation meeting, students should receive an overview of expectations and considerations for the program. During these meetings, Duke (2000) mentioned the importance of discussing options to participate in tour activities in the host country. Likewise, Gordon and Smith (1992) specified that during the orientation meetings, videos of the host country should be shown to the students and books published in the host country should be passed around to students. Other resources like reputable websites that provide information on the culture, traditions, religion, and language should be provided to students and families as well. Sharing this information may elicit student excitement and comfort in the upcoming program.

The following topics should be discussed during the orientation meeting: 1) packing list for students; 2) location of grocery stores, post office, pharmacies, and other relevant resources in the host country; 3) roommate selections; 4) food in the host country and student dietary restrictions; 5) U.S. currency conversion to local currency and use of ATMs; 6) recreational excursions available in the host country; 7) local weather conditions; and 8) student health and medical considerations. Although they may change, as the pandemic remains fluid and dynamic, any COVID-19 related considerations, restrictions, or mandates should also be outlined. Overall, orientation should pertain to the logistical aspects of the program, while pre-departure classes address learning objectives, cognitive preparation for the program, and the foundation for cross-cultural immersion.

### Pre-Departure Class Meetings on the Home Campus

Once the course begins, students should complete pre-departure class meetings. After conducting twelve study abroad programs, the most valuable advice that can be given to faculty members hoping to conduct a study abroad program is to invest time, effort, and energy in pre-departure classes prior to leaving. One researcher of this paper teaches nine 3-hour classes before departure from the U.S. The focus of these classes is to expose students to more in-depth information on the host country and cover some of the lecture content. The students are taught basic historical facts, cultural considerations, geographical information, political ideology of the country, and landmarks. The

students are also assigned to read book chapters and journal articles so that they have background knowledge on the country.

Pre-departure class meetings are also an opportune time for students to complete assignments prior to traveling to the host country. A heavier academic focus in the pre-departure class sessions allows students to spend more time visiting social service agencies, schools, and participate in excursions instead of spending time in the classroom once in the host country. For example, prior to traveling to New Zealand, our students completed course readings, a general knowledge quiz about the country, and a multiple-choice exam based on the lectures from the pre-departure class meetings. Additionally, students completed a short paper that aimed to further introduce them to aspects of the host culture. For the program to New Zealand, students were asked to complete their paper on two of the following topics: a haka, the significance of the marae, two social problems that plague the Maori people, the Treaty of Waitangi, stages of the family life cycle among the Maori, the concept of death and mourning among the Maori people, family life of the “Kiwi” versus the Maori people, and race relations among immigrants in New Zealand.

Lastly, having classes in the U.S. before traveling to the host country allows students to build skills for interpersonal interactions in the host country. Students in social science study abroad programs are likely to interact with local children or families. Pre-departure class meetings can prepare students to have culturally sensitive interactions with residents in the host country. Class meetings can also be a space for students to establish bonds with their classmates and faculty leader prior to departure. These friendships intensify as the program progresses, and we know from the literature that positive peer relationships during study abroad experiences enhance student learning and personal development (Brown et al., 2021).

### Payment Due Dates and Booking Flights

A detailed summary of precise payment due dates should be provided to students. This summary needs to be placed in a prominent place in the department, on virtual department resources, and included in the advertising materials. The funds for the program should not be due at the same time in one large installment. Instead, the payments should be due in several smaller installments.

Additionally, some programs allow students to make their own airline reservations. The date, time, and place where the first class is going to be held is given to the students. If students make their own airline reservation, it is their responsibility to arrive in the host country on time and get from the airport to the hotel. Faculty leaders may want to encourage students to purchase travel insurance in case plans are disrupted or cancelled if unforeseen circumstances arise (e.g., global pandemic, natural disasters). Likewise, due to a number of factors related to the global pandemic, applications for passports and visas are backlogged and can be delayed. Therefore, students should be encouraged to obtain travel documents well in advance and give extra time for processing. Other programs book a group flight for all the students and the faculty leader. Booking a group flight may be more expensive. However, when students have not traveled or taken a flight before, we recommend group travel. This provides a safety net and a source of comfort for the students and their parents.

### Copies of Medical Forms and Passport

All students should be required to fill out a medical disclosure form where students detail any medical condition(s) they have, including a list of all the medications that they are currently taking. This information is important in the event of an emergency in the host country. Faculty leaders should carry the medical disclosure form with them at all times (Medora & Roy, 2017). Depending on the study abroad location and current health mandates, faculty may also need to carry a copy of students' vaccination records or proof of negative COVID-19 tests to enter the host country.

Furthermore, the faculty leader should carry the front page of the students' passports at all times. Students may unintentionally misplace their passport, or their passport may be stolen. Having copies of the students' passports is an asset if one has to contact the American Embassy. It is important to note that the address and contact information of the American Embassy is provided to students at an early orientation meeting, and they are told to share this information with their families.

### Code of Conduct Form

Students participating in the study abroad program should complete a Code of Conduct form. The form should clearly specify expected student behaviors while on the study abroad program. The form should specify that

certain activities should be had in moderation, such as alcohol consumption. Additionally, the form should detail that students are not allowed to spend the night in another locale without the prior approval of the instructor. Furthermore, the Code of Conduct should detail appropriate personal behavior related to health and safety mandates throughout program locations. The recently revised 2020 Standards of Good Practices from the Forum on Education Abroad specify that study abroad programs should have policies and procedures in place related to students' health, well-being, security, and safety. These policies and procedures are particularly important while traveling during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

From our experience, if the Code of Conduct rules are broken, and if there is any disruption of the study abroad program, a warning is given to the student by the faculty leader. After two warnings, the student is sent home at their expense. Furthermore, the students are asked to sign an additional form stating they will not sue the university or faculty leader. Specifically, this form states that if they are participating in adventure sports, such as skydiving, ziplining, jet boating, or black water rafting, they are doing this at their own risk. The faculty leader, nor the university, will be held responsible if something should happen to them. Although many study abroad offices require a Code of Conduct form, the faculty leader may want to create their own additional form that is unique to their program destination and learning objectives.

### Grade Clarification

Study abroad programs should be rigorous and not a "short holiday." Students may think that because they paid for the program, attended classes, and were punctual, they deserve a high grade. Participating in class discussions, turning in well-written assignments, and turning in well-developed projects is essential. The criteria for the assignments should be clearly outlined in the course syllabus. Additionally, students' attitudes and respect for classmates and members of the host country is part of the final grade. Clearly defined expectations of student behaviors in the course syllabus may result in fewer problems during the program and when assigning grades.

## **During the Study Abroad Program**

### **Cultural Immersion**

One of the most salient components of study abroad programs is “cultural immersion.” Cultural immersion is the process by which students are immersed in the host culture and experience the local people’s customs, norms, practices, attitudes, and beliefs. Ridley et al. (1994) specify that when people travel for the purpose of taking a vacation or for the purposes of tourism, the travelers are more interested in the food, clothing, folktales, and music of the host country. For travelers, the travel is seen as a trip or vacation, where cultural differences between the host country and their own country are compared, but there is a lack of cultural exchange. On the other hand, cultural immersion encourages students to engage in unique cultural activities and direct cross-cultural communication. This immersion increases the likelihood that students will develop a deeper understanding of the culture, as well as more cultural empathy. Cultural immersion provides affective learning experiences that are oftentimes missing from the tourism model (Goldoni, 2015; Holmes et al., 2015).

According to Tomlinson-Clarke and Clark (2010), “Immersion in a different culture heightens an individual’s personal, racial, and cultural awareness and encourages examining thoughts, feelings, values, and behaviors that might be ignored or denied in a similar or familiar cultural context” (p.169). Hence, even though a student participates in a study abroad program, it does not necessarily make them more culturally knowledgeable, more sensitive, and more globally competent. What makes a person globally-competent and global-minded is experiential experiences in the host country and critical reflection of those experiences. For social science programs, specifically, students can apply their knowledge and skills through service activities, teaching, health education or other opportunities that are mutually beneficial for both students and a local site. For instance, Bell & Anscombe (2013) detail how their social work students visited a local school in India and then supported the school with completing an assessment of their health and sanitary needs. Likewise, Kako and Klingbeil (2019) share that nursing students on a study abroad program in Kenya visited community health centers and then taught community members about different health topics.

## Class Meetings and Assignments in the Host Country

Once students are in the host country, class meetings should occur in a variety of locations. Some lectures can be delivered by the faculty mentor, while other lectures can be provided by local guest speakers from the host country. Due to the nature of social science programs, community sites often serve as more effective learning environments abroad than formal classroom settings. Thus, faculty should consider class meetings at local social service agencies and places of interest from a cultural, political, and historical perspective.

In addition, exams and written projects may detract from the time spent learning about the new host culture (Koernig, 2007) or participating in other cultural activities. Thus, once in the host country, we limit the assignments to one reflection paper given at the end of the experience, which asks the students to reflect on their experiences during their stay in the host country. As part of the reflection paper, students are questioned about the guest speakers, excursions, visits to schools, orphanages, or social service agencies. Similarly, Duke (2000) remarked that journaling and treasure hunts should be included in the content of the study abroad program. He further added that although exams, oral presentations, and term papers are important and desirable as part of the class, they are best suited for pre-departure or post-departure class sessions. At the end of the study abroad program, our students are given a multiple-choice exam based on the lectures delivered in the host country (Medora & Roy, 2017).

## Guiding Student Processing During the Program

Upcoming events for the day should be discussed every morning with students. We review the schedule every morning when the group is traveling on the bus to their site for the day. We also remind students to take their itinerary with them. If there are any changes in the itinerary, the morning bus ride is an opportune time to share this information with students. Throughout the program, it is important to remind students that being flexible is important, as plans can change at any time.

In addition, after a field trip, visit to a school, a museum, a place of worship, or social service agency, debriefing is conducted during the drive back to the location where the group is staying. Occasionally, the debriefing is held in a quiet space at the site the group visited. This debriefing time allows students to share their experiences and reflect on events from that day. Depending on



program activities, students in social science study abroad programs may witness conditions that are considerably different from their own, such as severe poverty or malnourished children. Debriefing can help students process these differences. In addition, when situations arise in the host country that are unexpected or challenging to students, they are reminded to be sensitive and open-minded in their processing. We also encourage students to focus on what they learned through these experiences. For example, cultural differences in definitions of 'space,' 'privacy,' and 'time' are debriefed when encounters related to these themes are observed during the day. Other differences relevant to social science programs, such as childrearing, education, or healthcare access, should also be debriefed. Furthermore, when we have class meetings, the debriefing reiterates how the learning objectives of the course are connected to the guest speakers, landmarks, or site visits.

### Spontaneous Exploration and Free Time

Free exploration time during the program is an important and necessary condition for the successful completion of any study abroad program. We find that significant learning occurs during this time. Students are given three to four full free days during a short-term study abroad program (3-4 weeks). These free days are identified and specified on the course syllabus ahead of time. In addition, free time is provided on numerous days after guest lectures and excursion visits are completed. In these instances, students are given a free afternoon and evening.

Even though this time is referred to as "free time," learning still occurs during this time. Students learn how to use public transportation (bus or train), something that many of them have not done in their home country. If they decide to go shopping at a grocery store or shopping mall, they meet local people and oftentimes talk to store owners. Through these interactions, students learn new words and idioms that are unique to the host country. The students also learn about the vegetables, fruits, snacks, and the cost of food in the host country. Purchasing their own groceries provides students context for the cost of living in the host country. If the students decide to go out to a restaurant for dinner during their free time, they learn what the entrees on the menu are like, the type of service(s) offered by the restaurant, the cost of food, and the ambiance of the restaurant.

Furthermore, if the students decide to go to a bar, they can meet other adults their age, as well as observe how interactions and conversations with same- and different-sex individuals are initiated. After meeting the locals, they can ask them about their culture and customs. During these informal interactions, students have also observed that humor tends to be culture-specific and what tends to be “funny” in one culture may not be considered humorous in another culture. When students have this free exploration time, they are not given a curfew for when they need to be back at where they are staying in the host country (e.g. hotel, hostel, homestay). However, they are warned that if they decide to go to a bar or to any other place in the evenings, they should always go in groups. This warning is strictly ingrained in the students, and so far, this advice has not been abused or violated.

We have also found that during free exploration time, many students observe how minority individuals and indigenous people are or are not integrated in the community. They may identify the common stereotypes and prejudices towards certain groups of people. Overall, we find that significant learning tends to occur during students’ “free time”.

## **Post-Study Abroad**

### **Evaluation**

A beneficial last step at the conclusion of the program is to administer an evaluation. This step is useful for the faculty leader, the university administrators, and the ‘provider,’ if one was used. The evaluation will allow the faculty leader to know whether the program successfully addressed the learning objectives and which aspects of the program need to be altered in the future. Evaluation forms are most effective if they are given immediately after the program ends (Eckert et al. 2013).

Our students typically complete two evaluation forms. One evaluation form is required by the university, and the other form is required by the provider. The focus of the evaluation for the study abroad program is on the preparation, execution, the residential facilities, the faculty leader, guest speakers, school visits, food, and the program itself. This evaluation may be different than the regular end-of-semester course evaluation students typically complete, as this evaluation is more specific to the study abroad program. The evaluation forms that the students complete are on a Likert-type scale. There is

also a qualitative section in the questionnaire, where students are asked questions about specific aspects of the program. Overall, the evaluation assesses if the learning outcomes were met, as well as students' general perceptions and satisfaction with the program.

Faculty leader(s) are also typically asked to complete an evaluation form for the provider. This may be required by the faculty leader's university. The faculty leader has to specify whether or not the objectives of the program were met, and whether they were satisfied with the guest speakers, site visits, cleanliness of the lodging sites, meals, safety of the bus, and driver.

### Final Debriefing Session

A debriefing session should be considered for both the faculty leader and students once the group returns home. First, the university should consider facilitating a debriefing session for faculty leaders. This session would provide an opportunity for faculty leaders who conducted recent programs to exchange their positive and negative experiences. This forum provides an opportunity for the faculty leaders to learn from what other faculty leaders have experienced in other parts of the world.

Second, the faculty leader can facilitate a final debriefing session for the students. The debriefing session can be held on the last day in the host country or after arrival in the home country. This session helps to bring closure of the program for many students. They convene for the last time and share what parts of the program they liked the best and were most enjoyable. They are also encouraged to be honest and express which aspects of the program did not appeal to them. The faculty leader also summarizes the highlights of each destination for the group. Students are reminded not to be offended if their family members or friends are not as interested in their photographs and videos that they took during their study abroad program. Students are also told that it is natural and normal to be "sad" for a few weeks after they return. As Kruse and Brubaker (2007) specify, study abroad should be viewed as a process rather than an event, and post-program debriefing may aid students in processing their experiences.

Lastly, social science faculty should provide students final encouragement to apply this experience as they progress towards their careers. Faculty should remind students to continue reflecting on how their interactions

will inform their future work with diverse audiences. Example questions faculty can leave students with include:

How will this experience make you a more effective practitioner?

What from this experience will you apply to your future work with diverse audiences?

## Conclusion

We provide recommendations in this article for faculty members who are interested in initiating, organizing, and conducting a study abroad program in social sciences. Developing, planning, and executing a study abroad program for any length of time can be a challenging and time-consuming endeavor. It can, however, be one of the most professionally rewarding and memorable experiences that a faculty leader is likely to experience in their professional life. In our experiences, we have found students to be thankful for the experience. During the program, it is rewarding to see students mature, become more inquisitive, increase their tolerance, enhance their social skills, and expand their independence. For many of our students, this may be the only overseas experience they have in their lifetime. For a few students, the program will awaken the thirst for travel. After the program, some students may become seasoned travelers and truly global-minded citizens. The students who have participated in our study abroad programs keep in touch with us years after they have graduated and share that the program was a defining moment in their life.

The time and effort that the faculty leader invests in the program benefits the faculty leader as well. Taking students overseas widens their horizons and increases their general knowledge and is a satisfying and rewarding endeavor. The faculty leader gains exposure and the ability to harness experiences in different cultures. This knowledge can be very beneficial on the home campus and in the classroom to enhance teaching courses with international content. The faculty leader may also establish contacts with educators and researchers in the host countries and conduct cross-cultural research with them. More importantly, connections with colleagues from the host countries can result in lifelong friendships (Medora & Roy, 2017). Overall, the recommendations presented in this article aim to support faculty leaders in developing and implementing a meaningful and successful study abroad program.

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