

By Dana Wilkie

Developing Effective Faculty-Led Programs

Success Starts with Choosing and Equipping the Right Faculty Members

IN THE 25-PLUS YEARS that psychology professor Bob Thompson has led education abroad programs to Jamaica, he has pretty much seen it all: everything from students suffering from anxiety disorders to broken limbs to cases of sexual harassment.

He has also seen the bright side of education abroad—the things he hoped would occur when he first started leading this program at Shoreline Community College, located near Seattle, Washington. He has witnessed young adults embracing a foreign culture, learning how to live selflessly in a community, overcoming homesickness, developing valuable skills, and reaping the rewards of friendships he has built over the years with residents of the Blue Mountains of Jamaica.

Both the students and education abroad staff agree that international programs led by faculty members like Thompson offer opportunities for connections between students and faculty that are distinct from campus-based classroom interaction. However, choosing the right faculty members and effectively equipping them for the tasks at hand are crucial to a program's success.

Benefits of Faculty-Led Programs

Faculty members who lead the same program in the same location over several years are able to cultivate relationships that can enrich students' experiences and immersion in the local community. Nursing student Leila Alene joined Thompson this past summer in Jamaica, where students helped teach in local schools and lived together in one of three houses.

"It would not be the same without Bob," says Alene. "He's close with everyone [in the community]. They all look out for us and are welcoming. Having Bob there definitely makes us feel comfortable branching out and getting to know the people."

In addition to making it easier for students to get involved with the local community, says Thompson, a faculty member may better connect learning objectives from prior classes with the students' new environment. "[Teachers] know the community, they know the people in the community, and they've built trust," he says. This can be particularly effective with programs specifically designed for students in more regimented degree programs like business, journalism, or biology.

Similarly, students often benefit from having existing relationships and a support dynamic with the faculty prior to going abroad, says Darielle Horsey, who is the program manager for faculty-led study abroad programs at the University of Washington.

"Many of our students appreciate this comfort when so many other aspects of their abroad experience are unknown or foreign," she says. "The faculty member will be familiar with academic expectations and the student culture of the group. Also, students often maintain a relationship with the faculty member when back on campus and use them as references and mentors."

Duties Beyond the Classroom

Faculty who successfully direct study abroad programs are not only familiar with the culture of the country they are visiting—some even know the local language—but also possess characteristics such as flexibility, patience, and understanding that enable them to further support the students. Leading a group of students in a different country is an entirely distinct experience than teaching that same group in a classroom a few times a week on their institution's campus.

Tips for Preparing Faculty to Lead Programs Abroad

- Consider any gaps in the current slate of offerings (e.g., underrepresented areas of study or geographic regions) to determine if a faculty-led program could meet a specific need.
- Intentionally reach out to faculty who exhibit the qualities needed to successfully direct and teach study abroad programs.
- Think about all stages of support needed for faculty and students, from program idea and design through to the return to campus.
- Bring in staff from different departments across campus—health, safety, budgets, risk and liability, emergency preparedness—to guide faculty in these areas.
- Connect prospective faculty members with those who have previously directed study abroad programs.
- Upon return to campus, conduct reflection exercises, debriefings, and surveys with faculty to ease their transitions and learn how their experiences could be improved upon.

For more than 25 years, Jamaica's Blue Mountains have been the setting for a faculty-led study abroad program that Robert Thompson has directed for students at Shoreline Community College.



“The faculty leader has many more responsibilities than she would in the classroom,” says Cory Anthony, manager of marketing, outreach, and study abroad programs at Shoreline Community College. The faculty leader “serves as counselor, parent figure, confidante, and shoulder to cry on. A faculty member might be with the students almost all the time, and that alone can be draining.”

William Hayden, director of international programs at Austin Community College District in Texas, reiterates the different demands placed on faculty while abroad. “The learning curve for faculty who have never led a group of students abroad is steep,” he says. “Faculty invariably face multiple demanding challenges that come with managing a small group of inexperienced travelers in a foreign country. They learn that there is substantially more involved than just teaching.”

For these reasons, equipping faculty for their multipurpose role is critical to the success of a program. Such preparation can include working with stakeholders and other units on campus, as well as workshops and training on program design, diversity and inclusion, and health and safety concerns. Managing health and safety risks is particularly important, says Inge Steglitz, associate director of education abroad at Michigan State University. In addition to preparing for emergency situations, mental health issues like anxiety are increasingly prevalent among students.

“Some faculty understand that intuitively, but others take what they do on campus [and apply it] overseas and don’t consider that they will be with students, hypothetically, 24/7,” says Steglitz. “If something happens in the middle of the night, they will be the first responder. They will be called on to do things that campus services usually take care of—student misconduct, health issues, [and] group dynamics.”

The Good of the Order

Managing group dynamics is one of the more challenging aspects for faculty. Rarely a problem in the classroom, it is not uncommon for cliques to form on study abroad programs, Steglitz says.

“A single student might find themselves completely isolated from the group,” she says. “It might be because the group closes ranks against that person. It could be because someone isn’t comfortable joining groups. It gets more complicated if the reason for the isolation has to do with race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.”

Addressing these problems in a study abroad context can be significantly more difficult than in a traditional classroom, says Hayden from Austin Community College District.

While abroad, “students can forget that individual preferences are not always in the best interest of the group, so faculty leaders must communicate that the success of the program sometimes requires setting aside individual preferences,” he says. “Students can also behave in ways that negatively impact the study abroad

experience for other students, from being late to scheduled activities to other poor behavior.”

The faculty directing the program should directly address such behavior “quickly and firmly before they get out of hand,” says Hayden. “It helps to remind participants that not only are they traveling and learning together, but also experiencing one another’s idiosyncrasies and difficulties. Stressing patience and tolerance can help students adjust.”

A Win-Win Experience

Patience and tolerance are important attributes not only for students, but also the faculty directing the programs. The most successful study abroad leaders, experts say, are those who are passionate about their academic fields and about young adults experiencing that field in a global context. Students aren’t the only beneficiaries of the experiences—faculty often come away from directing study abroad programs with new areas of focus for their research.

“If a faculty member’s purpose in becoming a teacher was to engage students in the field of study that they teach in, to inspire them, to truly impact their lives in a lasting way, leading a study abroad program is the ideal way to accomplish this,” says Anthony at Shoreline Community College.

“A couple of years ago, I was hosting an information table on campus and someone came up to me, gestured toward one of my brochures for a faculty-led [study abroad] program, and said, ‘I’m working on my PhD in psychology because of this program,’” Anthony adds. “To not only see this, but be partly responsible for it, is truly rewarding.” ■

DANA WILKIE is a freelance writer based in Pennsylvania.

NAFSA RESOURCES

The Guide to Successful Short-Term Programs Abroad, Third Edition
bit.ly/2LOHdEN

“Collaborative Approaches to Developing Faculty-Led Programs”
workshop: bit.ly/2x9owWU

“Advancing Faculty-Led Programs at Community Colleges”:
bit.ly/2xgGCW5

Previous articles on faculty-led programs: bit.ly/2p7Qxtm