

By Janet Hulstrand

## Best Practices for Short-Term, Faculty-Led Programs Abroad

**IN THE PAST DECADE**, the number of students interested in short-term education abroad programs has risen steadily. In the 2004–05 academic year, short-term programs accounted for 51.4 percent of all study abroad programs.<sup>1</sup> The figure has risen about 9 percent since—today a whopping 60 percent of all U.S. students studying abroad now participate in short-term programs.<sup>2</sup> Among these, faculty-led programs continue to grow in importance. And while there is a great deal of variation in the details of policies and procedures governing faculty-led short-term programs from institution to institution, there are some generally agreed upon best practices cited by education abroad experts to assist any institution in developing or managing such programs.

### Ensure the Academic Integrity of Programs

Developing, nurturing, and maintaining academically sound programs, and ensuring that they are recognized as such is of crucial importance. “One of the most important things for credit-bearing courses is that they be unassailably academic. That’s the way to maintain credibility with campus constituents, students, and parents,” says Kathy Tuma, associate director of international and off-campus studies at St. Olaf College.

Having a thorough and well-defined process for reviewing course proposals is the first step. “There has to be a reason to teach the course abroad,” says Tuma. “We ask faculty to submit a tentative itinerary. We want to know, for example, how they will turn a tour of the Uffizi Gallery into an academic experience rather than just a touristic one. Will guest speakers address subjects that are pertinent to the course material? If it’s a political science class about world courts, will the students actually go to sessions of the various courts? We do a thorough review of proposed courses with that kind of thing in mind.”

At Elon University, proposals are reviewed by a standing committee that comes out of the general faculty council. “It’s a faculty committee that is kind of deputized by the overall curriculum committee to serve in that capacity for faculty-led programs abroad,” says Elon Dean of Global Studies Lee (“Woody”) Pelton. “Faculty have to explain why the destination is consistent with the academic goals for the class. Then the committee either approves it, or sends it back for revision.”

Most proposals reviewed by the committee are initially sent back for revision, a process that helps ensure that the programs will be of the highest academic quality. “It’s not about denying proposals, it’s about nurturing faculty,” says Rhonda Waller, director of study abroad. “Many of the members of the committee have had a course up for review and have had to go back and revise it. So faculty understand the spirit in which constructive criticism is offered.”

Pelton and Waller sit on the committee and lend their voices to the discussion during the review process, but they are not voting members. “We don’t speak to the bona fides of the course, and we don’t approve courses,” says Pelton. “But we know the business end of things. So, the faculty committee decides whether the course can run, but they don’t decide when it will run. We might keep a course on the books but say that we don’t think it’s a good idea for it to happen this year, for one reason or another.”

As the designated faculty fellow for Elon’s Global Education Center, Donna Van Bodegraven mentors faculty who are proposing new courses. “We have high expectations for academic rigor,” says Van Bodegraven. “We require all faculty to hold a one-credit preparatory seminar that their students take during the fall semester. Their course proposals must include the draft syllabi for both the course and the seminar.” The seminar, Pelton explains, “is really a beginning of the course. It includes practical information about visas and other logistical matters. But offering a credit-bearing seminar also gives professors the chance to get the students thinking about what they want them to think about



Students participate in a short-term, faculty-led study abroad program in Peru. Here, they are visiting the Sacred Valley in January 2015.

in January, and to assign readings, etc., at a time when they have access to the library, assured access to the Internet, and so on. It also gives faculty and students the chance to get to know each other before leaving.”

Creating well-designed, academically sound courses requires a great deal of advance planning. At most schools, the process begins about 15–18 months before the time the students will go abroad. Peter Rees has developed and taught courses abroad for the University of Delaware since 1972. “Our proposal deadline is 14 months from departure,” he explains. “Once approved, budgets are initially developed nine months out, and finalized four months out. Meanwhile, students must be recruited and applicants individually interviewed. It has to be made very clear that this is an academic program. Everything that is structured needs to be related to the academic theme.”

After students have returned to campus, they complete a survey and turn it in to the study abroad office. “We summarize this feedback and add a summary of the program’s level of organization and its financial footprint, and send it to the director, department chair, and college dean, thereby closing the loop from proposal stage to return,” says Lisa Chieffo, associate director for study abroad at the university’s Institute for Global Studies. “Ultimately, the academic quality has to be overseen by the academic units, not by the study abroad office. However, we may point out problems we have been made aware of.”

Helen Gaudette, director of the Office of Global Education Initiatives at Queens College of the City University of New York, is also a faculty member who has created and taught programs abroad since 2007. “As a historian I believe that students understand events, issues, and cultures better

when they go to the places where things happened,” she says. She assigns readings both before and during the course, includes research assignments, and actively engages students in the experience through debate and other pedagogical techniques. But she is also an administrator when she is not teaching abroad herself. In that role, she “works hard to prepare faculty leading the courses,” she says. “Then, right after the course is over, we collect student evaluations. And we try to visit programs, especially the new ones, while they are in session abroad.”

### **A Leg Up on Policies and Procedures**

Education abroad professionals cite that developing and maintaining clear policies and procedures for establishing, operating, and monitoring short-term faculty-led programs abroad makes them run more efficiently.

are accepted?" She adds, "Publishing a list of faculty responsibilities is a good idea."

### **Prepare Faculty for the Experience**

Most institutions have incorporated required predeparture and on-site orientations for students, and this certainly is considered a fundamental best practice in the field. But ensuring that faculty are adequately prepared for the additional demands and expectations involved in teaching abroad is equally important. When asked what institutions need to do to be prepared to react effectively when problems arise, Tuma's answer is almost reflexive: "The first thing is faculty training," she says. "Faculty need to know exactly what is expected of them if they're facing some kind of an emergency abroad. In our training, we use the line from the movie, 'ET, phone home...' It's important to make it clear to faculty what

## **Tips from Faculty Who Have "Been There, Done That..."**

"Prepare students academically, culturally, linguistically, and logistically. When preparing your budget, build in a contingency fund, and always overestimate. Plan the schedule to allow time for students to complete assignments. Be prepared, and be flexible. Anything that can go wrong may go wrong."

*Donna Van Bodegraven, associate professor of Spanish and faculty fellow, Elon University Global Education Center*

"Assign readings but not too much reading. Find the right balance, and give a variety of assignments. Draw a firm line between your space and that of your students. Let students be independent, but be there for them if they need you. Don't count on getting a lot of your own research done: you will—and should be—with them a lot!"

*Helen Gaudette, lecturer, Department of History, Queens College, CUNY*

"I would never undertake a study abroad program without either personal experience and knowledge of the location or travelling with a codirector who has had that experience. It is impossible to 'learn along with the students.' Too much advance planning is needed."

*Peter Rees, professor emeritus, Department of Geography, University of Delaware*

their responsibility is in terms of reporting incidents to us. Then, depending on the situation, we've got a clear set of protocols to follow. Of course, you can never imagine what each situation might be, but as long as we have our procedures in place and our faculty trained in what to do, then you just work your way through each situation as best you can."

A good way to help prepare faculty to teach in short-term programs is to host an event for them. "I run a how-to workshop for faculty every semester, with a panel of veteran faculty who tell about their experiences, and I guide those present through the nuts and bolts of how things work," says Chieffo. "On short-term programs there's less room for error. A problem that might seem insignificant on a semester program can dominate a short-term program, so it's even more important to stay ahead of the curve and anticipate problems."

Wonderful as it can be, teaching short-term programs abroad is not for everyone. "At St. Olaf, it's been a pretty self-selecting group," Tuma says. "I've had faculty say to me, 'I no more want to spend 24 hours a day with a group of students for a month than anything. You couldn't get me to teach a class abroad.'" Rees agrees. "It's necessary for faculty to be aware of and responsible for eventualities that may occur with student welfare," he says. "If you're not willing to accept this level of responsibility, you shouldn't get involved in study abroad."

### **Promote Productive, Respectful Collaboration With Faculty**

A central goal of both faculty and administrators should be to not only avoid the potential pitfalls of creating and maintaining faculty-led programs, but to work together in ways that are truly collaborative and mutually respectful and supportive.

"Faculty teaching abroad need as much support as possible," says Rees. "They are in a foreign country with students. They can't be hamstrung with too many rules and regulations dictated from home. They need flexibility and understanding in applying available funds, for example. My institution does a good job in this respect. But the budget is a heavy burden, and administrators need to understand what it is like to operate in a foreign environment."

Chieffo says that viewing faculty "as partners" is important. "We need to offer the faculty the support they need to manage a group of students well while teaching their course. But on the flip side, we need to recognize when someone is simply not fit for the job, or when the level of support they need exceeds what is reasonable or feasible for us to provide."

Gaudette's experience as both an administrator and as a faculty member who has taught abroad is helpful in seeing both sides of the

coin. "Faculty should tell administrators what they need," she says. "Administrators are busy, don't know the course material, and may overlook something important." She adds, "Ultimately, faculty are in control of designing their courses, but they need to realize that they must stay within the budget. They should work with administrators to plan affordable activities and excursions, so more students can go."

Last but not least, one of the best things about short-term programs is the opportunity they offer students who might not otherwise have a chance to study abroad to do so. "I can guarantee you that without these programs, many of our students would not be able to study abroad," says Ascarelli. And short-term programs are beneficial for faculty too: "It gives faculty the chance to work with highly motivated students from a variety of disciplines, and to share their expertise with them in a way that is incredibly exciting for both students and teachers." **IE**

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#### ENDNOTES

1 The 2004-2005 statistic was included in the Institute of International Education's 2007 *Open Doors* Fast Facts. Available online at <http://www.iie.org/EN/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fast-Facts>.

2 Institute of International Education 2014 *Open Doors* Fast Facts. Available online at <http://www.iie.org/EN/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fast-Facts>.

## Short-Term Abroad Program Resources from NAFSA

### Guide to Successful Short-Term Programs Abroad, 2nd Edition

*Edited by Sarah E. Spencer and Kathy Tuma.*

A practical guide for practitioners who direct and administer short-term programs. Includes chapters on faculty-directed programs, internships, independent study, and service learning, budgeting and financial matters, health and insurance issues, and much more.

### Guide to Education Abroad, Fourth Edition

*Edited by Margaret Wiedenhoef, Magnolia Hernandez, and David Wick*

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Elon University student Emma Lee Everett and Professor V. Kameswari, director of the Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute in Chennai, India. Emma is handing an honorarium to Professor Kameswari at the conclusion of a panel discussion focused on Indian language and culture.

“Centralized processes are probably the most student-friendly and also best for the study abroad office, even though faculty who have been doing things on their own for years might not like such a change,” says Chieffo.

Tuma agrees, and advises education abroad administrators to “push hard with your administration for a) sufficient staff and b) centralization. In order to run programs smoothly, effectively, and safely, you have to be sure that you have adequate staff to handle whatever kinds of situation may pop up.” She adds, “When you think of all the things that can go wrong in an off-campus program, and the liability that the institution might have if they don’t have the people to adequately cover an emergency—they’re far better off providing staff than they are handling liability cases.” Chieffo adds that sharing stories from the media with administrators that show some of the things that can—and have—gone wrong in study abroad programs can be an effective way to drive this point home.

Sometimes using an education abroad provider is advisable, depending on the circumstances. “If you are trying to run programs with a limited staff, or if your staff does not have experience in such programs, working with a provider might be the right way to go, at least in the initial stages,” says Tuma. “However, even if you are working with providers, what happens when the one person in your one-person office is ill, or on vacation, and a crisis comes up that needs immediate attention? It’s important to think about these things, because things do happen, and the institution needs to have adequate resources available to respond when they do.”

Planning for the unexpected is also important when creating policies for short-term faculty-led programs. For instance, what happens if a lone faculty person is with a group abroad, and something happens to one of the students that requires his or her attention in such a way that he or she can no longer teach the class?

“We have a policy that every program must have a person who can step in in situations like this,” Tuma says. “It might be an accompanying faculty spouse, or a person from our staff, or sometimes it’s an on-site person. If we are sending someone with the group to cover this role from the U.S., we cover their airfare and accommodations.”

As part of creating policies for short-term faculty-led programs, incorporating health insurance—like any education abroad program—is recommended. According to Chieffo, “Situations like this [a student becoming ill or having an accident] are a good reason to include mandatory health insurance in the program fee, and the policy should include ‘bedside visit’ coverage to fly a family member out to be with the student, and also coverage for a health professional to accompany a student back to the U.S. Ideally, the faculty should have as little healthcare responsibility as possible, as this is not their role. It’s also not fair to other students on the program to have their director’s time fully occupied by such an emergency over an extended period of time.”

“There are best practices for student health and safety, and there are also best practices for program development,” says Daniela Ascarelli, assistant vice provost for international programs and director of study abroad at Drexel University. In terms of the latter, she adds, “It’s important for funding issues to be considered both from a student point of view and a departmental point of view. If faculty are released from teaching some of their regular courseload in order to teach abroad during the break, then how will the department get the money to pay for the courses they’re not teaching? All of these things have to be worked out.”

Chieffo says that it’s important to have a process in place—“even with just a few programs.” She recommends that institutions have a standard proposal form, standardized application forms, and acceptance and payment procedures. “It’s also important to be clear about responsibilities,” she notes. “Whose job is it to recruit students, the faculty or the study abroad office? Who sets the program fee? Who decides which students