

Making the Most of Short-Term Immersion

What happens when a location has an excellent infrastructure that allows for great ease of administration and yet, at the same time, presents unexpected yet distinct obstacles with regard to immersion in the local society and culture?

STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS TRY TO ACCOMPLISH MANY DIFFERENT GOALS. Often near the top of the list is immersing students in the culture and society of the host country and city. The location (the college or university) being visited often determines to a great extent the manner and the extent of this immersion. Unfortunately, the instructional outcomes both inside and outside of the classroom are not the only factors university administrators have to consider when deciding to stay in a given location over time. Frequently there are logistical factors to consider such as the condition of instructional facilities, quality of the school's administration, instructors, etc. So what happens when a location has an excellent infrastructure that allows for great ease of administration and yet, at the same time, presents unexpected yet distinct obstacles with regard to immersion in the local society and culture?

This is the situation faced by the summer study abroad program in Puebla, Mexico, administered by the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA). The four-week program is housed at the Universidad de las Américas (UDLA) in Puebla, one of the premiere private universities in Mexico and provides all of the most modern facilities and amenities. However, because of the location, nature of the university, and length of the program, a question arises as to what kind of study abroad experience the students are actually getting. Are the students truly being exposed to the country and city being visited or are they simply taking UCLA courses at a foreign university without any integration into the local context?

On the Surface

UDLA is located just outside the city of Puebla, about a 90-minute drive from Mexico City, in the smaller town of Cholula, which, in pre-Columbian times, was a bustling city in its own right. Evidence of this can still be seen in the impressive archeological remains that are located within a moderate walking distance from the campus. Both Cholula and Puebla are beautiful colonial jewels that offer students a glimpse of everyday Mexican life in small and moderate-size cities, away from the large cities and tourist meccas

that may be the only exposure to Mexico prospective students of the program have had.

This ideal location for UDLA is further enhanced by the campus itself. Contemporary and colonial style architecture share space on the campus and give it a

Alley of the Frogs in Puebla, Mexico



modern yet distinctly classic Mexican appearance. These buildings house up-to-date equipment and facilities that would be found at just about any comparably sized campus in the United States. In addition to these academic resources, the campus has other amenities that make it very similar to a U.S. liberal arts campus. There is a swimming pool located near the athletic field where the school's football team practices. That would be the *American* football team (there is also a school soccer team). All of this is enclosed by a fence with various gates around the perimeter. Security guards staff these gates 24 hours a day. At night anyone trying to get into the campus has to present an ID or some type of proof that justifies their purpose on the campus.

Similar to the modernity of the facilities on campus, the administrative structure in the academic units are first-rate and are well equipped to accommodate international summer study abroad programs. Administrators work closely with representatives and faculty from the home campuses to create and manage programs that are tailored to their specific needs.

A Closer Look

From the description above, it would seem like UDLA provides the ideal situation for an American university or college that wants to establish a travel study program in Mexico. In many ways it does. However if we revisit the goals of study abroad programs mentioned earlier we remember that for most, immersing students in the culture and society of the host country and city is usually of primary importance. With regard to this goal, programs like the one at UDLA may not always get the job done.

Ironically, the very same things that make it so appealing make it that much harder for students to engage in activities in which they can become immersed in the local culture. UDLA can afford to have excellent administration, facilities, and amenities because it is a prestigious private institution. Many wealthy and prominent families from Mexico City and the surrounding area send their children here. Such an institution has to provide the best facilities for its students. This includes a secure and safe environment. Consequently the university becomes an island unto itself. Students rarely have to leave if they do not want to because nearly all of their needs can be met on campus. The result is a top-rate and well managed university with abundant resources that provides students just about everything they need. This may be exactly what the Mexican students and their families want but it makes it harder for a summer study abroad program to accomplish its goals.

Short-term summer study abroad programs such UCLA's have to face these obstacles of isolation in addition to a few others if they want to give students a rich cultural experience. The fact that it is in the summer already reduces the number of Mexican students that U.S. students can interact with. Granted, the lack of local students is a problem encountered by any summer study abroad program; however, when added to the obstacles already mentioned, it makes

cultural immersion that much more difficult. Another issue that all study abroad programs have to contend with is the tendency for students from a given program to congregate with each other and not interact with other students or locals. This is of particular importance if students are trying to learn a foreign language. The problem is influenced by the living conditions. For example, UCLA's students live in residence halls, all together in the same floors or in adjoining buildings.

Curriculum Concerns

A program's curriculum is also a significant factor in the students' ability to immerse in the local culture. For UCLA's Puebla program, students elect one of three tracks: elementary, intermediate, or advanced. In the elementary track students complete the last two quarters (UCLA is on the quarter system) of the first year of college level Spanish, a culture seminar, and then have the option to take an additional independent study course that they start there but have the rest of the summer to complete. The intermediate track is the same except that there students complete the second year of Spanish. In the advanced track students take a composition course and a culture course, again with the option of the independent study course.



The intensive nature of summer programs such as this one can make cultural immersion even more difficult. For example, the accelerated curriculum in Puebla means that students are taking a quarter's worth of work (10 weeks) in a reduced time frame (4 weeks). This also means that students have to study more per day than they would otherwise in a regular quarter. Taking all of these factors into account (the facilities on campus, the security, the conditions specific to summer) students have to make a concerted effort to get significant exposure to the local culture and community. A typical day might consist of the students getting up, having breakfast with each other in the cafeteria, going to their classes, going to dinner together in the cafeteria, studying together, and then going to bed. The weekends offer greater opportunities for contact with the outside but even then it is not as simple as walking to town. Cholula, the closest town, is not far but it is at least a 15-20 minute walk although students can get there with a short bus ride. Puebla, the larger city, is a 20-minute bus ride or a 15-minute taxi ride away. The point here is that students can get to these places fairly easily but with the campus providing so much and the stu-

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dents having a heavier study load, it is often very tempting for students to simply stay on campus. Even if students decided to go out to the city on the weekends, a month-long program allows for only four weekends of this (three if you consider that much of the last weekend is spent getting ready to go home).

Time and Opportunity

The resulting problem with this situation is two-fold, one clearer than the other. The more obvious problem is the lack of opportunities for interaction with the local population, be it students or residents. Such a condensed program not only has fewer opportunities for interaction but less time for interaction overall (four weeks). The not so obvious problem has to do with student perceptions about the society and culture that they are visiting. Students are housed in an

elite private institution that has all the comforts of home and that allows little access to the surrounding community. This could lead to students acquiring a skewed or at least inaccurate perception of life in Mexico as well as its culture. Therefore the reduced time and opportunities for interaction combine with the privileged status of the university to create an educational context that seriously jeopardizes one of the primary goals of any study abroad program: to immerse students in the culture and society of the host country and city.

The news, however, is not all bad. The UCLA Puebla program has found some ways to counteract the problem of inaccurate perceptions and to make up somewhat for the lack of interaction opportunities. These all revolve around the idea of maximizing the time outside of the classroom by planning organized cultural excursions that get students off the campus and into the surrounding community.

Three of the four weekends have planned excursions to Oaxaca, Mexico City, and Acapulco. Oaxaca is approximately a six-hour bus ride away but is well known for its rich culture and archeological ruins. When they go to Mexico City students visit the ruins of Teotihuacán just outside of the city before visiting the artist and bohemian section of the city, Coyoacán. The trip to Acapulco is more vacation-like in nature but it still provides students the opportunity to travel within the country and experience at least a couple of days outside the university. In addition to these excursions, there is also a planned trip to Puebla itself where many of the culturally significant sites are visited.

These outings go a long way towards giving the students a more substantial and balanced view of Mexico and the commu-

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nity of Puebla-Cholula. However, more can and should be done to maximize students' cultural immersion in a short four-week program like UCLA's. Students can be required to interview one or more residents of the local community as part of an ethnographic assignment which can easily be incorporated into either the language or culture courses they are already taking. Mini internships of one or two hours a week can be organized that require students to work in a municipal office, museum, or archeological site. Such internships would provide valuable contact with members of the local community and could also be easily incorporated into the classes. Finally, an effort could be made to connect local artisans and artists with the students by organizing presentations either on campus or in the community. In the case of Puebla and Cholula, those towns are well known for their pottery and confections so there would be no lack of shops to arrange this. None of

these suggestions are revolutionary but they are examples of creative yet simple ways to give students more and better contact with the city and the country. Administrators and faculty of other programs can easily incorporate similar methods that suit the needs of their particular program.


Seeking a Balanced Approach


Study abroad programs, whether they are a year or a month long, have to work to strike a balance between the curricular and the co-curricular. The purpose of a U.S. school creating a study abroad program is not to replicate an existing program on foreign soil but rather to create a program that accomplishes certain academic goals by incorporating the unique co-curricular activities available when studying in a foreign country. This is obviously easier to accomplish if the host school has the administrative infrastructure to accommodate foreign programs. Fortunately for UCLA's Depart-

ment of Spanish and Portuguese, UDLA provides this but at the cost of a certain amount of isolation from the surrounding community. This problem is exacerbated by the nature of summer study abroad programs that are more intensive and allow less time for cultural immersion. UCLA's Puebla program has tried to address these problems by incorporating cultural excursions into nearly every available weekend during the program. Excursions like these as well as other efforts like internships and local engagement can be integrated into short-term summer study abroad programs such as this one so that students can have a rich cultural and academic experience. **IE**

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WILLIAM SMART & DEBORAH HEFFERON

WILLIAM SMART
Independent Consultant, Corvallis, OR
NAFSA Member since: 1975

Favorite place to visit: Many foreign countries that I have visited or have on my 'must visit' list.

Most memorable student: A coiffless Omari student who delivered pizza to my house, has since become an Ambassador of his country and stays in touch periodically.

Favorite NAFSA conference site: Portland, OR.

Other than international education, what is your fantasy career? A translator for the United Nations.

What do you know now that you wish you had when you were younger? That I should have learned lots more about my family history before my parents and grandparents died.

Why did you pledge to the New Century Circle? NAFSA and NAFSAs have contributed substantially to my love of the profession and my hopes for a broader world view of Americans.

DEBORAH HEFFERON
Independent Consultant, Washington, DC
NAFSA Member since: 1986

Favorite place to visit: Thailand and India, or anywhere with great food and energy and grace.


Most memorable student: A Vietnamese high school student I met in Hanoi. She received a full scholarship to Colorado College.

Favorite NAFSA conference site: Vancouver

Other than international education, what is your fantasy career? Short-story writer.

What do you know now that you wish you had when you were younger? That just because I am good at something doesn't mean I have to do it—Life is full of opportunities and possibilities.

Why did you pledge to the New Century Circle? NAFSA has helped to define my professional life. I am especially interested in providing more opportunities for OASEAS members to reach higher in their profession.



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