

Expanding Horizons: Opportunities and Challenges of Consortia

OFFERING A WIDE ARRAY of education abroad opportunities can sometimes be a tall order for small higher education institutions or those with budget constraints—but it doesn't have to be. Education abroad consortia fill the need of institutions who want to offer the most options for their students to study abroad but can't do it solo.

Consortia offer institutions the opportunity to present both faculty and students with a rich and robust array of opportunities for international study and teaching in a time of shrinking budgets. They come in all shapes and sizes and are created for a variety of reasons and meet a variety of institutional needs. Some are large international organizations that offer education abroad opportunities in particular

disciplines—for example the Global Engineering Education Exchange (Global E3) and the TransAtlantic Science Student Exchange Program (TASSEP). Others serve similar institutions (community colleges, small private liberal arts colleges, etc.), or are nationally or regionally based. And some are put together to develop very specific “custom” programs in collaboration with a few other schools.



What they all have in common is strength in numbers. Consortia make it easier for institutions to provide their students and faculty with a wider variety of choice in study abroad programs, and a better chance at success in developing and sustaining programs that might be difficult to maintain on their own. And they can offer particular advantages for schools that face exceptional challenges due to limited resources.

That said, entering into a consortium agreement is not something to be done casually. Finding the right consortium, the one that will best meet your institutional needs, requires forethought and research. According to Daniela Ascarelli, assistant vice provost for international programs and director of study abroad at Drexel University, finding the right “fit” in a consortium is just as important as finding the right fit with bilateral agreement partners. “Some consortia have a membership fee, others

don’t. Some have yearly conferences, others don’t. Some have dedicated listservs and means for members to communicate with each other, others don’t. In each case, neither option is necessarily better: just be sure that you understand the needs of your office and what services the consortium provides before joining.”

“Membership in consortia has allowed us to increase our portfolio of offerings to our students and then, if interest warrants it, to pursue a bilateral agreement with specific institutions,” Ascarelli says. “Our first consortium was with the Global Engineering Education Exchange (GE3), which opened the doors of some of the top global engineering and technical universities to our students; this allows us to have a solid network of like-minded engineering schools, both domestically and internationally, that we can collaborate with” Drexel now also participates in the UAS7 consortium, which has allowed them to explore

study and co-op options for their students at seven schools of applied science in Germany.

Catherine Spaeth is director of the Office of Global Studies at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, and current board vice president of the Upper Midwest Association for Intercultural Education (UMAIE), a consortium of private liberal arts colleges in the Upper Midwest that was created in 1964 and has operated continuously and successfully since then. St. Catherine joined the consortium in 1969, and has been a member ever since. “St. Kate’s is a medium-sized institution with a small undergraduate population,” Spaeth says. “Membership in UMAIE allows our faculty to teach abroad in greater numbers than if we offered only our own courses to our own students. They can teach a course in their field and be confident—as long as the topic appeals to all institutions in the consortium—that it will enroll students. Many faculty have also told me they enjoy teaching other types of students and

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NUTS AND BOLTS: How Does It Work?

There is no “one-size-fits-all” set of rules for operating consortia. Here are a few answers to the question, “Is there a required Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in connection with your consortium arrangements?”

“Yes, we have an MOU for both of our consortia. The MOU outlines the responsibilities of each institution and the student exchange balance that needs to be maintained.”

—**Daniela Ascarelli**,
Drexel University
(Consortia: GE3 and UAS7)

“All member schools pay a modest membership fee, agree to provide two members to the UMAIE Board of Directors (which meets twice a year), agree to allow and encourage their faculty to offer courses through the consortium, and have a registration process in place that allows their students to enroll in UMAIE programs...There are also membership guidelines, and policies that have been developed over the years as to how the consortium and the courses function.”

—**William Swart** (Augustana College) and **Catherine Spaeth** (St. Catherine University)
(Consortium: UMAIE)

“We do not have an MOU in place with the schools in our consortium. There has really been no need for that kind of formal agreement in our particular program.”

—**George Hiller**, director of international and internship programs, Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center

having our own students mix with students from other institutions. It’s energizing.” She adds, “Belonging to UMAIE has been a great way to internationalize our faculty.”

Challenges of Consortia

While the benefits for participating institutions can be enormous, William Swart, chair of the sociology department at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, and current board president of UMAIE, is frank about the challenges inherent in belonging to a consortium. “I often echo the statement made by one of our former college presidents, who said, ‘Collaboration between institutions of higher education is an unnatural act,’” he says, adding, “Seriously, there have been a number of challenges we’ve encountered, from differences in course proposal expectations and evaluation, to meeting the different needs of students on different campuses, to cross-institutional insurance and liability questions... the list goes on and on. But,” he adds, “UMAIE is a self-governing consortium that relies on a collaborative board of directors to deal with these challenges, and in my experience, this board has maintained an ongoing commitment to offering the best short-term study abroad programs out there, and has handled these challenges from a perspective of shared commitment...It’s been a pleasure, not a nightmare, to work with them.”

Starting with an initial 20 members, UMAIE currently has only seven, and would welcome new partners. What would constitute a good match? “This type of model absolutely requires flexibility, creative problem solving, and an intentional interest in participation,” Swart says. “Schools that are half-hearted about sharing control, authority, or administration of their study abroad courses have dropped out of our consortium over time...If you can’t or don’t want to ‘play well with others,’ this type of thing isn’t going to work for you.”

Community Perks

In addition to greater opportunities for faculty and students, consortia can offer benefits to the community at large. The Southwest Virginia Higher Education

Center (SVHEC) is a state agency of the Commonwealth of Virginia located in the southwest corner of the state, in Appalachia. It was created by executive director Rachel Fowlkes and director of international programs George Hiller in 2003. “This area has low numbers of college graduates and an economy that has historically underperformed the rest of Virginia,” Hiller says. “Initially, the focus of our program was to assist small businesses with export promotion, and I still do some of that,” Hiller says. “However, it quickly became evident that there was a major need among the small two and four-year colleges in our region to expand international education programs.”

Fowlkes and Hiller led the effort to develop a consortium of interested area community and liberal arts colleges, ranging in size from 600 to about 3,000 students. In 2004 they applied for a U.S. Department of Education Business and International Education (BIE) grant under the Title VI program. “The thrust of our application was that individually, these small colleges did not have either the expertise or the critical mass to develop and manage an international education grant program. However, collectively we could do this under the leadership of SVHEC,” Hiller explains.

SVHEC’s application for a BIE grant was approved, “and we became the first consortium grantee in the history of the program.” They are now working on their third multi-year BIE grant, which has been a great success. “Through the BIE grants, SVHEC was able to launch a series of short-term study abroad programs for students and faculty in far southwest Virginia,” Hiller says. “Our first series of trips was to Mexico, the second to China, and the latest are to Germany. One of the key goals of these trips is to stress the importance of international trade to our economy in far southwest Virginia, and to highlight for the students the number of firms in our area who are seeking globally savvy employees.”

Because the BIE program places an emphasis on capacity building at grantee institutions, all of the trips organized by SVHEC have included a mix of faculty and students

What should you look for in a consortium run by a third-party provider?

- Member schools with similar or compatible academic standards
- Access to financial aid for your students
- A rigorous health and safety protocol
- Programs and course syllabi vetted by faculty
- Providers with experience working around the world and access to programs around the world
- Dedicated student services personnel at all study abroad locations
- Extensive opportunity for students to immerse themselves in the culture of their host country so they don't stay stuck in an "American bubble"
- Consistent review and analysis of performance each term and in each location
- What conditions ensure a harmonious and productive experience in a consortium?
- Your campus places a high priority on study abroad
- Your faculty support and are involved in study abroad
- Your campus accepts foreign university and third-party provider credit
- Your financial aid travels with your students
- You have studied and vetted multiple study abroad programs and have issued a list of approved programs

—Carol Jambor-Smith, associate vice president of institutional relations at IES Abroad

from the region. They have also used funding for faculty development to explore the linkages between southwest Virginia and the global economy. In their current grant from the U.S. Department of Education, for example, they have focused on the intersection of STEM and international business in their area. "Going forward, most STEM jobs in the U.S. will be internationally linked: joint ventures, subsidiaries, licensees, etc.," Hiller says. "So we think it's very important that these different academic disciplines focus on common approaches to prepare their students to compete in a global economy."

The international program at SVHEC has also helped promote the establishment of education abroad programs at the individual schools. "When we started the consortium there were no established programs in place," Fowlkes says. Now two of the four schools have a dedicated education abroad program and director. "These developments may well have occurred on their own at some point," she allows. "That said, I think our international program has been a very important

catalyst in the process. We have also aggressively encouraged the administration at our partner schools to develop expanded international education goals."

There many benefits to participation in a consortium, some less obvious than others. According to Spaeth, one of these is "the opportunity to put into practice on the academic and administrative levels what we preach to our students who are planning to study abroad: flexibility is necessary; ambivalence will be around every corner; you must be prepared to interact with others whose values and priorities are different from yours. Our willingness to travel outside of our institutional comfort zones makes for a richer and more diverse experience for all of us," she says.

Of course, she adds, the most obvious of the benefits are also the most important ones: "increased study abroad opportunities—for our students and for our faculty." **IE**

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