

Beyond ‘That Travel Thing’

“AREN’T YOU DOING THAT ‘TRAVEL THING’ THESE DAYS?” asked an English Department colleague in the hallway recently. A bit startled by the novel description of my position as director of international education and programs, I chuckled while pointing out that these duties involve a bit more than functioning as a travel agent or participating in educational junkets abroad.

The Best Job in the World

My transition from faculty member to administrator in international education has been illuminating. I grew up hearing my father, who had been a professor and department chair, proclaim that being a professor is the best job in the world. He assured me that no position offered more autonomy, satisfaction, and quality of life than being a tenured professor.

In 1989 I was hired as an assistant professor at California Polytechnic State University. My professional life progressed quite well: new courses to teach, occasional publications, and increased committee responsibilities. The years moving up through the professorial ranks also included memorable international teaching and research opportunities.

I remember resuming my activities at Cal Poly after a two-year sabbatical and leave of absence in North Africa. The transition in returning to campus after being abroad was challenging. Faculty from other departments or colleges would greet me by indicating they had not seen me for a while—as if I had been away for the week at an academic conference. Department meetings upon my return seemed to belabor the same issues debated years earlier. It was a bit frustrating because the university continued on its predictable course while I had experienced new things. Still, I re-adjusted and was soon promoted to full professor with responsibilities running the graduate program.

Three years ago I took a detour from the “best job in the world.” While I continue to teach one or two classes a year and participate in some department activities, directing international education and programs has markedly changed my personal and professional life.

I scrutinize the international news early each morning and late each evening. Because of events such as the tsunami in Southeast Asia, bombings in London and Madrid, and the spread of avian flu around the world, my priorities shift and my schedule changes. As a regular faculty member, I determined when I taught, held office hours, and worked on research and publication. In my new position, administrators, faculty, students, and daily crises determine the make-up of my days.

Managing six staff members has also been a unique experience. I had worked extensively with international students and had participated in international



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Students and faculty who participate in international education and then return home are similar to Joseph Campbell's adventurer in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The hero embarks on a quest, encounters ordeals, experiences adventures, and gains insights but then returns to tell his story. The hero reenters with a "life-transmitting trophy."

education as a student and later as a faculty member, so the learning curve was not as steep with international education issues. The level of interaction with staff, however, has been much more intense and gratifying than I could have anticipated. Frequent meetings and informal chats throughout the day foster a spirit of collegiality that differs from my experience within a large academic department.

In some ways directing international education and programs seems similar to running a small business. I am not suggesting that university programs adopt a corporate model but rather pointing out that my job involves managing personnel, balancing expenses and revenue, and promoting various programs.

My background in linguistics and literature well suits me at times for my current position, and yet at other times I believe experience in diplomacy, risk management, event planning, and counseling and guidance would come in handy.

Faculty perceptions about my position continue to be interesting. Some think such administrative duties involve flexible hours, frequent travel abroad, and a diversion from teaching and research. Before taking on this position, I might have had similar misconceptions about other administrative positions. Now I understand that I have a daily calendar of endless commitments, I travel less than I did as a professor, and I sneak in teaching and publications activities outside of the normal 8:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. workday.

Making a Positive Difference

I find working in international education gratifying because, despite my cynical nature, I truly believe in its mission. In a 2005 report commissioned by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the authors assert that, following the terrorist attacks, we are in a "Sputnik moment" that requires us to commit ourselves to understanding other languages and other areas of the world. At perhaps no

other time in our nation's history has it been more important for U.S. citizens to gain and share insights with those representing other cultures and points of view.

Although I have less time to spend with individual students, and frequently encounter only the problem cases or the overachievers, I like providing whatever inspiration and assistance I can to them as they join the world community.

Being involved in international education has given me opportunities to make a difference throughout the university in ways very different from teaching. During the last International Education Week, my international education program colleagues and I devoted our collective energies to inviting, planning, and hosting a visit from Said T. Jawad, the Ambassador of Afghanistan. I remember thinking and observing to the staff that we would remember this event for the rest of our lives.

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While interviewing students who apply to study abroad, I hear their aspirations about living and studying in other countries. Many have been motivated to pursue international education because of experiences that have been recounted to them. A student will study language, literature, and civilization in France because her mother enrolled in the same program several decades earlier. Another student will travel to Italy because his mentor worked on restoring ancient Roman ruins 20 years ago.

Similar stories are told by international students coming to campus. International education changes the student participant's life and alters those who come in contact with that person. Even one international student provides "value added" to an entire

ADVERTISER'S Index

JANUARY+FEBRUARY 2008

Adviser's Manual	52
Bond University	41
Center for Study Abroad	54
Chickering	23
CMI Insurance Specialists	31
Educational Perspectives	19
Executive Leadership Development Program	60
Griffith University	33
Harbour Group	9
IALC International Association of Language Centres	49
Kaplan/Aspect	inside back cover
Klasko	7
Lesley University	55
Marsh	5
NAFSA 2008 Annual Conference	back cover
New Century Circle	59
Programs for Leaders	62
Shulman Rogers	39
Singapore Tourism	inside front cover
Washington Symposium	2
Wolfsdorf Immigration Law Group	53
World Learning	51

classroom. Encouraging students and faculty to participate in international education and welcoming their counterparts to campus are extremely rewarding activities. International education has the potential to transform how we view ourselves and the world around us.

Although I miss parts of my previous faculty life, I am not yet ready to give up my "travel thing." International education continues to be an exciting journey for me. **IE**

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