Creating Sustainable Education Abroad Programs in Nontraditional Locations

**AN INTEGRAL ELEMENT** in the internationalization efforts on most campuses is increasing the numbers of U.S. students studying abroad. Most educators also want to provide their students with a wide range of choices, so that they don’t all just go trekking off to London, Paris, and Rome, but seek out experiences in nontraditional locations as well.

The data suggest that efforts to encourage both of these goals are paying off: According to the latest *Open Doors* (2013) report, published by the Institute of International Education, study abroad by U.S. students has more than tripled over the past two decades, with significant increases in the number of U.S. students going to Latin America and China, as well as to other non-European locations.

While the importance of getting U.S. students to engage in education abroad in other parts of the world is widely recognized, programs in nontraditional locations do present challenges that need to be addressed as an essential part of program planning and development so that they will be sustainable and will contribute to the well-being of the people in host locations as well as the students who participate in them.

**Developing New Programs: How to Get Started**

The School of International Training (SIT) in Brattleboro, Vermont has a longstanding history of offering education abroad opportunities in nontraditional locations—and the programs have stood the test of time.
“Our programs were founded on the idea of fostering international peace by learning to live together despite cultural differences,” says Laurie Black, SIT dean for external relations and strategic enrollment management.

The longest-running SIT programs in nontraditional locations are in Nepal (since 1973); India and Brazil (1979); and Kenya (1982). SIT programs focus on critical global issues through experiential education, community engagement, homestays, and an emphasis on field-based undergraduate research.

In the early days, SIT programs were developed based on personal and institutional contacts. “Now, in 2014, we select locations that are of demonstrated interest to students and faculty, and that offer innovative opportunities to focus on a critical global issue,” Black says. “Then we identify local institutions, faculty, and other resources to develop a strong, sustainable network. We’re able to do this because of our long history in running overseas programs, since 1932 as The Experiment in International Living and today as part of the larger organization World Learning. One existing contact can lead us to other relevant individuals and communities.
and it expands from there as a new program idea takes hold and is shaped by local input.”

Most successful programs start with some kind of faculty or institutional connection to local contacts in the host country. The University of Minnesota began developing programs in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East in the early 1980s. “A group of faculty and staff, some of whom were former Peace Corps volunteers created the Minnesota Studies in International Development programs (MSID),” says Sheila Collins, associate director of the university’s Learning Abroad Center. “They believed they would have been more effective volunteers if they had understood more theory behind international development. So they started a program that combined development theory with practical experience.”

Personal and professional contacts abroad led to the selection of the initial sites in Jamaica, Morocco, Columbia, and Senegal. “These contacts either became our resident directors or led us to someone else that became our resident director,” Collins says, and adds, “Student interest, students’ health and safety, and the ability to identify good on-site faculty all played a part as well.” MSID currently has four program sites—in Ecuador, India, Kenya, and Senegal. The university also runs language and culture programs in Morocco, Tanzania, Turkey, Venezuela, and Mexico.

The International Sustainable Development Studies Institute (ISDSI), a program provider based in the Chiang Mai province of Thailand, began in 1999 when Joe Brockington, associate provost for international programs at Kalamazoo College, wanted to create an experiential study abroad program focused on issues of sustainability and ecology.

“Our work with ISDSI began with a series of initial visits by me to discuss program possibilities with Mark Ritchie. He had done some study abroad programming for another institution in the early 1990s, and had returned to full-time consulting,” Brockington says. “I was interested in developing a program that would immerse our students in the history, culture, and economic practicalities of a developing nation.” I wanted them to have at least one course in Thai language, and a cultural project that would bring them into the inner workings of an NGO or social service agency. I also wanted them to have at least part of the time be in a homestay. Although I advised and represented the college’s point of view, I left the content of the courses and the overall structure of the program to Mark who had his PhD in sociology and years of on-the-ground experience in Thailand. I found his engagement on behalf of the local peoples particularly admirable. I also agreed with his educational philosophy that students should be taken out of their comfort zones and put in contact with local people who would determine the agenda of projects, and often what was taught.”

Now in its 15th year, ISDSI works with a number of partner schools. “All of our courses are community based,” Ritchie says. “That is, we develop our courses based on the needs and input of the community, with their full buy-in and support. Because we work so closely with them, our courses play a key role in capacity building and community empowerment. Rather than our students coming to ‘help’ the marginalized, they are going to learn and to listen. Local experts teach our students, and students live with and work alongside community members while learning about mangrove conservation, forest ecology, and sustainable agriculture.”

Another Kalamazoo College program began in 2010. Margaret Wiedenhoeft, associate director of the Center for International Programs explains, “One of our faculty members had a connection with a colleague in Varanasi, India, who was executive director of an NGO called NIRMAN, which has a mission focusing on educational issues and accessibility for primary school students. We have students who have experience working with our civic engagement office in the Kalamazoo public school system. This seemed like a good opportunity for our students to see how access and support for primary school education works in a city like Varanasi.” Wiedenhoeft says it’s important for educators who are planning such programs to have a sense of the type of program they would like to create.

### Advice From the Experts

**“Do not rush. Do your homework. Make sure you are working with the right people on-site, and that you have your own faculty’s buy-in. On-site faculty and staff training is also extremely important.”**

—Sheila Collins, University of Minnesota

**“Find local partners who are already living and working in those locations so that you can truly engage with the issues on the ground that are important to local communities.”**

—Mark Ritchie, ISDSI

**“We do not go with the idea that we are there to ‘fix’ things in Uganda. We are there to be immersed in the culture and learn from Ugandans, as well as from our experience.”**

—Ardith Peters, Kennesaw State University

**“Know the location thoroughly (and contemporaneously) or have someone living in that location who knows the location and has known it over time. Develop risk assessment, risk mitigation, risk management plans as you are developing the program.”**

—Joe Brockington, Kalamazoo College

**“This is a long-term commitment and one that cannot be taken lightly. Instead of starting from scratch, consider partnering with other institutions that already have programs.”**

—Laurie Black, SIT Study Abroad
“But it’s also important to be open to suggestions from members of the host community. They will know what is important to teach guests about their community.”

At Kennesaw State University in Georgia, Ardith Peters, an associate professor in the department of social work and human services, runs a Maymester program in Uganda, now in its fifth year. Peters grew up in Africa and wanted to return there as an adult. The opportunity to work in Uganda arose from a colleague’s work with an international group that was focusing on sport as a post-disaster intervention. “The founder of the Kampala Kids League was at a conference and made a profound impression. He came to campus and my dean invited any of us who wanted to work with them to do it. Some of us did.”

Peters agrees wholeheartedly with the importance of not entering into international projects with a “let us help you solve your problems” mentality. She cites faculty being insufficiently familiar with the destination, and “believing that their students have the answers to the challenges of the developing world” as two of the biggest mistakes in planning programs. “We do not go with the idea that we are there to ‘fix’ things in Uganda,” she says. “We are there to be immersed in the culture and learn from Ugandans, as well as from our experience.” This attitude can be reflected in ways large and small. For example, Peters says, “the items that we take with us (soap, sugar, lotion) are not charity, but an honorarium we offer to thank our local partners for their time, just as we would for any other experts who meet with us.” The Uganda program started in 2010 with five students; in the second year there were 9 students, and this year 12 students are participating.

Promoting Programs
Developing a new education abroad program in a nontraditional location usually takes a few years to gain strength because unlike traditional locations, the location itself won’t necessarily have students clamoring to sign up for the experience.

“At Kalamazoo, from the beginning of program development, we work with faculty on campus who are also interested in the study abroad site/region as a complement to their work on campus,” Wiedenhoft says. “For this reason, faculty often encourage students to attend these programs, and they have a positive influence over students.”

Faculty involvement in recruiting is important at the University of Minnesota as well. “We heavily promote programs directly to students as well as through their faculty and academic advisers,” Collins says. “And we send faculty and advisers to the program sites so that they become very familiar with the curriculum, program model, health and safety issues, and the on-site faculty and staff. As a result they are comfortable recommending programs to their students. Faculty also generally appreciate past participants sharing their newfound insights and knowledge.
in their classes. One very simple but effective way of interesting students in these programs, Collins says, is for faculty to talk about their research and other experiences abroad. Academic advisers are also influential. “We have found that students listen when they hear from someone they know and respect that another country can become the classroom to learn about environmental sustainability, education, or civil engineering.”

Sustaining and Funding Programs: How Do You Keep a Good Thing Going?
The importance of establishing widespread buy-in on the home campus before a new program even begins cannot be underestimated. “Involve people from across the campus—risk management, relevant faculty, education abroad, civic engagement, students, etc.—in the development of the program,” Brockington advises.

In addition to having solid support at the home institution, support in the host country is equally important. “You should not try to start a program if excellent on-site support cannot be identified and confirmed for long-term involvement,” Collins says. “It is difficult enough with this, and without it, it is nearly impossible. Administrators must have a great deal of confidence in how students’ health and safety is being managed, both in day to day and emergency/crisis situations.”

She agrees that faculty buy-in is also very important. “We have found that engaging faculty in the development of the curriculum is an excellent way to get their support. Inviting faculty, advisers and administrators to participate in the development of programs, program reviews and familiarization site visits are also very productive, though costly.” But she adds, “Institutions should be prepared to lose money initially, until the program can support itself. Our programs are generally given at least three years to become established.”

How is the expense of sustaining these programs met? At the University of Minnesota, student program fees go to support all aspects of the programs, including overseas faculty salaries, housing, field trips, classroom and office rental, administration, etc. Kennesaw State University has a global fee that students pay into each semester. “This is used to provide scholarships for education abroad,” Peters explains. “For example, the 18-day trip to Uganda is $3,900 this year. The global scholarship provides $1,225 of that amount. Financial aid can be used to help pay for tuition, which is extra.” Kennesaw also strongly supports faculty and development efforts. This Maymester, two faculty directors as well as an education abroad staff member travelled to Uganda in order to better understand the program and learn best practices that can be shared with other program directors. A member of the education faculty also went along, “to develop additional faculty resources in the event they are needed in future years.” At Kalamazoo College also, institutional funds are used to support faculty visits to overseas sites.

When Is It Time to Pull the Plug?
What are some of the warning signs that a program may not make it for the long run? According to Collins, “poor communication, curriculum development continuing to be a challenge due to cultural differences, poor faculty, site visits that leave either party dissatisfied, poor student evaluations, and student incidents on-site that are poorly managed” are all signs that it might be time to consider ending a program.

She adds that low student interest, the loss of institutional support, and increased risk or liability factors are the most common reasons for not continuing a program.
“The key factors for the success or failure of a program in a ‘non-traditional’ location are essentially the same as those for programs everywhere, with the possible exception of security, says Brockington. “Nontraditional locations are generally far away and unknown, so parents and university staff tend to feel they are riskier. The ‘failure’ of a program located in a nontraditional location may be due entirely to reported social, economic or political issues entirely beyond the program’s control—and perhaps entirely divorced from reality.” On the other hand, he adds, “Programs perceived as disorganized will not get a good word of mouth recommendation from one group of students to the next. Activities, readings, courses, and staff that demand student engagement in the curriculum and activities are important.”

“It’s not easy to start your own programs in nontraditional locations unless you have the right people with the right expertise in the right places, and the required level of resources to develop and maintain programs,” Black says. She adds, “Not every interesting program idea will be successful. But it’s important that some areas of the world that are much less familiar to U.S. students continue to host study abroad programs, so that we can expand our understanding in the increasingly globalized times in which we live. Strong interest in a particular country or program may not always be enough to sustain two programs of a similar nature. Instead of starting from scratch, it may be best to consider partnering with other institutions that already have programs.”

Aiming for the Best Case Scenario
When programs are well planned and administered, they not only provide invaluable learning experiences for the students, but also real and significant benefits for the local communities they take place in. Ritchie details some of those realized by ISDSI’s involvement in Thailand.

“Villagers used the fact that we study their river and local watershed to testify before the Thai parliament that a controversial dam should not be built. We’ve built trails for ecotourism with local communities, helped with orchid conservation in mountain forests, replanted mangroves, and helped map remote islands for community groups. Our students have volunteered to try out new activities, help test-run hikes and cultural activities for the development of sustainable community-based tourism.” He adds, “In village after village the response we get from community members about the benefits they’ve received is ‘empowerment’ or ‘pride in who we are.’ For the marginalized communities we work with, this is no small thing. Listening to their stories, giving them a voice, is hugely important. Because of this, community members are more confident and better able to articulate their needs and desire to outsiders, governments, and development projects. Also, seeing that international students are interested in the local traditions and in small-scale sustainable livelihoods in the villages has motivated young people to return to their communities, rather than leaving for factories and the big city.”

The ways host communities can be positively affected through these programs are myriad. For example, alumni from SIT study abroad created bilingual children’s books for children in Bolivia, and are contributing to the preservation of traditional Mongolian music; and University of Minnesota program alumni connected the Kibera Girls Soccer Academy with thousands of people in the United States, helping to raise the organization’s profile and financial resources, and launched a U.S. chapter of Hamomi upon their return.

“Most students applying to these programs are interested in global issues and want to learn a different value system,” says Wiedenhoft. Two ISDSI alumni, Amy Kasper and Lily Montesano, prove her point and even carry it further. “ISDSI made me culturally and linguistically competent for making connections with local people. My most memorable experiences have been with those people who have become family and lifelong friends,” says Kasper. And Montesano adds, “I think about my time in Thailand frequently, and I know that I have become a better student, scientist, and global citizen because of it.”

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