

Multidisciplinary Programs Abroad

AMONG ITS MANY OTHER BENEFITS, education abroad offers faculty members an excellent opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues from other disciplines to provide their students with the most well-rounded and comprehensive picture possible of the location they are exploring.

In the spring of 2012 Ron Kaufmann, professor of marine biology and environmental studies at the University of San Diego (USD), taught an honors seminar in environmental studies that included an “embedded” spring break trip to the Dominican Republic, together with colleagues Lance Nelson (theology) and Mark Woods (philosophy). “This kind of activity has numerous benefits for students and faculty alike,” Kaufmann says. “For faculty, the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues from different disciplines is very exciting, and the conversations we had while preparing and teaching this course have greatly enriched my perspective on the subjects that I teach. For the students, the combination of viewpoints from various academic disciplines and the real world is particularly appealing. Too often, academia sets itself apart from the day-to-day pressures that real people face, and this course was a great way to connect the tradition and outcomes of academic inquiry with practical aspects of contemporary environmental issues.”

Kaufmann’s colleague, Lance Nelson, has also team-taught “Religion and the Performing Arts in Bali,” with David Harnish from the USD music department. Apart from two meetings on campus prior to departure, that class took place entirely in Bali. According to Nelson, “There’s nothing like being ‘on location’ with students to demonstrate the need for interdisciplinarity. When you’re in a classroom, it’s much easier to control the material and the focus so that one can stay within the comfortable terrain of one’s own discipline. But when you’re on the ground, students are exposed to the reality of the subject in a kind of full-spectrum way. Religion, politics, culture, history, ecology, etc.—it all comes at you, all-at-once. When the students want to know, ‘What’s going on here?’, it sure helps to have multidisciplinary, multiperspectival expertise on tap.”

Different Models

“Multidisciplinary” instruction in the context of study abroad can take many forms. Kira Espiritu, director of international studies describes two basic types offered at

USD. “We have large faculty-led summer programs in London and Paris that are coordinated entirely by our office. At each location, there are five to six different courses being taught by USD faculty members from different disciplines. Students choose to take just one course, but the orientation and many of the cultural events and other group activities are organized for all students and faculty members regardless of which course they are taking.” In the second type of program, Espiritu says, two or three professors from completely different disciplines design a short-term course that they co-teach, and then they travel together with their students. “In these programs the students can choose the type of credit they want, but all professors and all students attend all of the lectures, activities, etc., and the teaching is truly integrated as one seamless course.”

In the first model, faculty members usually live near each other and often interact socially outside of the formal events of the program: and just as with students, the faculty members often find the experience of traveling and experiencing a new culture together promotes bonding. “Oftentimes, they find commonalities that they did not know they had prior to spending time with each other,” Espiritu says. “They often remark that when they are on campus they get stuck within their own departments and don’t have the time to really get to know others across campus.” In some instances, the friendships formed among faculty members abroad have helped to foster cross-discipline research ideas or new cotaught courses, either back on campus or in future study abroad programs.

The second type of USD program, Espiritu says, is becoming popular among faculty members who have been teaching multidisciplinary programs already on campus and now want to extend their activities into an international context. “These professors already know each other and have established relationships as they have worked to develop their courses in tandem.” She adds, “Both of these types of programs definitely help to create more awareness of education abroad in the campus community.”

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A program in Belize involving renewable energy and ecology studies combines students from three community colleges.

Indeed, Kaufmann, Nelson, and Woods are currently working on plans for future interdisciplinary courses that include international experiences. “We continue to be enthusiastic about the opportunities for providing students with experiential education in other countries and cultures,” Kaufmann says.

One of the benefits for students of these kinds of courses is that they become exposed to topics that might not have been covered if they had been in a more traditional class solely focused on one discipline. They are also exposed to different theoretical approaches or interpretations of the same thing. “Let’s say there is a spring that is regarded as sacred, or a trance ritual—something that students have never experienced before, something that faculty have different theoretical perspectives on,” Nelson says. “There’s tremendous value in giving students the respect and space to be thoughtful about their responses, and in modeling for them the faculty members’ respect for the culture and for each other’s differing responses and perspectives. Respect is key to the study abroad experience: for the culture, for students, for faculty, and between all of these.”

Creating Multidisciplinary Classes: How Do You Begin?

There are myriad ways in which multidisciplinary classes evolve. In the case of the environmental studies class at USD, the course grew out of an interdisciplinary faculty

development workshop that was sponsored by the institution’s Frances G. Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture. “That workshop took place in the Dominican Republic, and Lance Nelson and I both participated, along with a number of other colleagues from USD,” says Kaufmann. The theme of the workshop was “Sustainability, Eco-Theology, and Eco-Justice,” and the participants included faculty members from a number of disciplinary backgrounds. “During our trip, we had an opportunity to read and discuss concepts that bridged the intersections between religion, sustainability (environmental, economic, social, political, etc.), and justice, among other concepts,” Kaufmann says. “I was struck by the richness of our discussions, and especially the benefits of talking about those issues from multiple points of view.”

The workshop motivated him to include two additional elements—religious tradition, “which can have an enormous influence on how people view the environment,” and the contrast between developed and developing nations—in a new course he envisioned. He discussed his idea with Nelson and Woods, and they decided to develop a course together that would include a consideration of environmental issues from multiple perspectives—primarily science, religion, and justice. “We also wanted to include an explicit comparison between developed and developing nations, and that is why we decided to incorporate a trip to the Dominican Republic during spring break,” Kaufmann explains.

TIPS FROM FACULTY MEMBERS

“If you’re going to do something interdisciplinary in study abroad, it’s important to work with colleagues in disciplines that complement each other well,” Nelson says. “For example, for the course I taught in Bali, it was immediately obvious to students that Balinese religion is heavily interconnected with music and other performing arts. So, religious studies and ethnomusicology worked well together. It didn’t take a lot of time to convince our students that our approach made sense, that it was not an artificial imposition. One thing you don’t have much of on a three-week study abroad experience is time, especially for abstract theoretical discussions. If what you’re talking about is not obviously and immediately connected to what the students are experiencing on the ground, you lose their engagement with astounding rapidity.” But with a good match, and the right kind of preparation, Nelson says, multidisciplinary education abroad can offer an ideal teaching situation. “There’s nothing like teaching *in situ*—with the ability to take students in the afternoon to see and experience, and perhaps interact with, something that you’ve discussed in class in the morning,” Nelson says. “To see the students’ excitement is a teacher’s dream come true. And to do this in conversation with a colleague who has overlapping interests but a slightly different perspective—what could be better?”

Madison Area Technical College (Madison College) has been offering faculty-led programs abroad, including some interdisciplinary offerings, since the early 1990s. In 2007 multidisciplinary offerings became part of a conscious strategy for building student and faculty member engagement in programs abroad. “It’s one of the best practices we recommend as part of our [U.S.] Department of State Capacity Building for Study Abroad award,” says Geoff Bradshaw, director of international education. Inspired by Madeleine Green’s work, *Where Faculty Live: Internationalizing the Disciplines*, Bradshaw and his team made a significant effort to reach out to occupational disciplines and schools of the college that were not actively

internationalizing, and to engage faculty members with education abroad through the development of short-term programs. “The motivations for creating interdisciplinary programs were twofold,” he says. “In part it grew out of the nature of sustainable development as a field, which itself brings together perspectives from social sciences and applied engineering to examine the needs and resource solutions for developing world communities. So when we started working with the Community College Sustainable Development Network (CCSDN), it was a logical transition to find ways for faculty as well as students from different colleges and different academic disciplines to use the common ground of sustainable development to create multidisciplinary engagement.”

In one such program, three members of the network, Joel Shoemaker (Madison College), Chris Miller (Heartland Community College), and Sarah Hawkins (Lakeshore Technical College)—created a new study abroad program after they realized, in talking with each other at the CCSDN annual conference, that they had complementary skills sets that could complement each other nicely in a single class. Shoemaker and Miller are both highly experienced in renewable energy technology, and Hawkins teaches environmental science, sustainability, and ecology. Their idea was to expose students not only to the basics of solar electric systems, but also to demonstrate to them how this technology can fit into a developing world setting.

Now planning their third year, the class involves 11 days in Belize, with both course titles and pre- and post-trip assignments varying between the different colleges. Faculty members and students from the three schools “meet” via Skype prior to the in-country stay to review health and safety issues, discuss planning and packing, go over course expectations, and introduce students to the culture and customs of Belize.

“The fact that the students are learning about both energy and environmental issues has added a lot to their experience because they are so intrinsically linked,” says Hawkins. “For example, when we go on a

“Work with colleagues who already have some expertise, or are at least willing to acquire it, in the study abroad location. The course must be localized, and this takes considerable time and effort. You don’t want to get stuck teaching with someone who wants the travel experience, but isn’t willing to work beforehand to localize their expertise. You also want to have contacts and pre-established relationships in the location.”

—Lance Nelson
the University of San Diego

“Collaboration is key! It’s also important to have support from the administration at your home institution. The CCSDN grant opportunity aligned well with our college’s mission statement and strategic goals.”

—Amy Edwards Patterson
Moraine Park Community College

“Plan as much as you can beforehand and be very clear in your communications with your colleagues and your in-country contacts. When in-country, be flexible to changes that may occur due to the fact that there are multiple stakeholders working together.”

—Sarah Hawkins
Lakeshore Technical College



U.S. students learn about sustainable energy technology and install photovoltaic units in Belize.

tour of a hydroelectric dam, the students hear the energy/electricity side of the dam from the manager explaining how it works; then they hear the social side from the village elders who live downstream from the dam and who are affected by the change in the river; finally they see the environmental aspect by canoeing down the river after the tour of the dam.”

And according to Shoemaker, the experiential learning that results from such exposure is invaluable not only in the field. “The Belize program has demonstrated to me the value of hands-on, experiential learning. I believe the students will remember this program for the rest of their lives. Now I try to include more of this kind of learning in my academic classes.”

Hawkins agrees. “Students retain information that is put into context much better than if it were presented on its own. My students understand photovoltaics much better because they not only installed it, but they discussed the impact the system will have with the village leaders after the installation.”

Another Madison College program involves a three-track, service-learning program in rural Jamaica with students in renewable energy, health care, and education. “Students from all the disciplines participated by doing separate activities, but



they are brought together through specific learning activities,” says Bradshaw. The energy students installed solar panels on rural health care clinics and did demonstrations of renewable energy for children in the schools; nursing students did health care outreach at the schools; and schoolchildren came to the clinics to observe the nursing students’ work.

For this program, Madison collaborated with Moraine Park Technical College and Red Rocks Community College. Amy Edwards Patterson was the instructor for the Moraine Park students. “I was eager to combine writing opportunities with hands-on technical and service experiences for my students, providing them with an authentic exploration of culture, writing, and sustainability,” she says. Her students’ experience culminated with digital storytelling projects.

Some of the gains for faculty members and students may be both unexpected and invaluable. “Through this program I have gotten to know my students on a much

deeper level than in a regular class,” says Hawkins. “I have been so impressed by their life struggles and have so much respect for them. I now try to view all my students as though they have a profound backstory that

I just haven’t heard yet. Having this attitude allows me to connect with a broader section of my students than before.”

But of course in the end, the most important thing is what the students learn while they’re away and what they do with that knowledge. Roy Bourgasas, a recent USD graduate in economics, participated in the program in the Dominican Republic. “Having professors from three different disciplines allowed us to thoroughly understand the environmental issues that the citizens of the DR were facing,” he says. “We studied these

issues from three different perspectives, which allowed us to more appropriately speak and think about possible solutions,” he says, and adds, “The most important thing I learned from taking the class is that we cannot rely on only the scientists and environmentalists to solve our environmental problems. We all need to work together and combine our different areas of expertise in order to fundamentally change the way we care for our environment. We must understand the different cultures and religions on this planet and work to get everyone on the same page.”

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