

Education Abroad for Freshman

Michigan State University's Freshman Seminars Abroad uniquely combine principles of on-campus freshman seminars with the learning objectives of study abroad.

Origins of Freshman Seminars Abroad

While freshman students traditionally have been an underrepresented group in education abroad nationally, in 2001–02, Michigan State University (MSU) found itself below even the already low national participation level (1.3 percent of MSU participants were freshmen, compared to 3.2 percent nationally). Hoping to get students interested and engaged in education abroad earlier in their college careers, in the spring of 2003, then-dean of MSU's International Studies and Programs, John Hudzik, charged the Office of Study Abroad (OSA) with developing programs designed specifically with incoming freshman students in mind—programs that would not only increase freshman participation, but would also provide a developmental jumping off point to prepare these students for subsequent and more intense education abroad experiences.

MSU's Office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education (APUE), the unit charged with coordinating first-year experiences, has been involved from the very beginning in the development of the freshman seminar abroad (FSA) concept and subsequent creation of the very first FSA abroad in summer 2003. Like most U.S. institutions of higher education, MSU has offered for-credit, on-campus, first-year (freshman) seminars for well over a decade. While these seminars take a variety of forms, they share in common a focus on academic and cognitive skills as well as on personal development.

They are geared toward developing graduates who possess complex cognitive skills, are able to apply learning in practical contexts, have an understanding and appreciation of human difference, and are able to make decisions and manage conflict.

Well-developed first-year experiences have been known to help improve student success—and most international educators would agree that an education abroad experience early in a student's college career can help them develop a greater global understanding, which could fuel their desire to experience more education abroad later in college. FSAs occupy a unique space in the array of freshman seminars overall in that they take place during the summer *prior* to students' first semester on campus, thus serving, in effect, as an extended orientation to MSU and to college life in general. FSAs, then, aim to assist students with the transition to college—and beyond.

A Brief History of FSAs at MSU

Within the overall framework of established guiding principles of student development, the following considerations led to the selection of Quebec City (Université de Laval) as the inaugural FSA location in 2003:

- parental perceptions of student safety (9/11 was still a very recent memory);
- existing education abroad infrastructure;

- existing on-campus academic support and regional expertise;
- exposure to a different culture; and
- cost containment.

Despite the fact that the marketing window for the first FSA was quite short (March–July), the program filled to capacity (35 students). Based on this initial success, and employing the same development criteria, a second FSA in Mérida, Mexico, was developed for spring break 2004. While this program was also successful, it was soon realized that, by spring break of freshman year, first-year students generally have developed to a point no longer served by the original intent of the FSAs. Subsequent programs have taken place during the summer preceding the first year of college only. Over the years, programs in Ireland,



Japan, South Africa, Italy, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (Scotland) have been added, with more on the horizon.

While FSA program design has taken slightly different shapes over the years, the model has now matured, incorporating knowledge and insight gained through trial-and-error and continued improvement in matching program design to learning outcomes.

Within a framework of “challenge and support,” MSUs FSA programs aim to:

- combine the academic engagement characteristic of freshman seminars with the cultural and experiential learning characteristic of study abroad;
- advance students’ understanding of the world in support of MSU’s Liberal Learning goals and Global Competencies;
- introduce students to scholarly and academic life at MSU;

- expose students to education abroad, global/cultural learning, and a topic content area;

- help students develop meaningful relationships with peers, faculty, and staff to support their personal and academic success; and

- help students gain confidence and skills related to their college transition.

Components of Freshman Seminars Abroad

Academics and Coursework

The core of each FSA is formed by academic tracks developed and taught by MSU faculty and other qualified teaching staff. Faculty are encouraged to teach from their passion and create two-credit units that begin during the programs’ on-campus program orientation, continue on site, and conclude with one or more follow-up sessions during the fall semester. Tracks are

designed to make optimal use of program locations and feature thematically related excursions as well as local guest speakers. Students receive a regular college-level syllabus and have daily reading or writing assignments. A final project or paper is usually due, and final grades posted, by the middle of fall semester. Past tracks have covered such diverse topics as “Health and Healthcare in Ireland”; “Globalization, Culture, and Identity”; “Community, Agriculture, and the Environment”; and “Addressing Apartheid’s Legacy.” Credit earned counts toward the total number of credits required for graduation. Students are also encouraged to enroll in on-campus courses in fall or spring semester of their first year that fulfill university requirements and are related to participants’ thematic and regional learning.

Program Structure

A typical FSA is about two weeks in length and takes place in July and August. The first two days are spent on the MSU campus, in one of the residence halls, and provide academic and logistical orientation programming, including a portion for parents only. While students meet with their faculty leaders for their first class sessions, program support staff and an OSA representative meet with parents (students may bring their parents along for orientation, and most of them do). A joint session with students, parents, the program team, and OSA representatives features information on health and safety, time for questions and answers, and a day-by-day description of the program itinerary. After parents depart, students engage in team-building exercises. Day two consists of more academic work, a session on personal safety and well-being, and topics such as time management and introduction to college writing. Some programs include field excursions to local museums or may show a thematically related film. By the time students depart for their program’s destination on day three, they have typical-

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ly formed a cohesive group whose members look out for each other.

While slightly different from program to program, the onsite portion consists of a balanced mix of in- and out-of-classroom experiences, while allowing for sufficient free time to give students opportunities to explore their new environment on their own.

During fall semester, and once they are settled into a routine, students are required to participate in one or more track-related academic sessions as well as an “Unpacking your FSA” session. Based on workshops designed for students about to enter the job market, these are designed to help students link their FSA learning to their college careers and to MSU’s global competency learning outcomes (these outcomes are listed online at <http://undergrad.msu.edu/international.html>).

Recruiting and Preparing Faculty and Staff

The prototype FSA consists of two teaching faculty and one support staff person. Faculty come from a variety of disciplines and support staff are drawn from among residence life, student life, education abroad, office of admissions, and academic advising staff. While it has not always been easy to recruit faculty for these programs, word-of-mouth has helped enlarge the pool of academic staff intrigued by the programs’ unique features, and there now exists a solid cadre of experienced program leaders. Recruitment of support staff has been easier, though in the current economic climate, supervisors are not as willing as in the past to give release time to staff for participation in an FSA.

In staffing the FSAs, the program planners work to ensure that, in addition to solid academic content and gender balance, each program has at least one person with prior experience in-country, one person with student affairs-type experience, and, if applicable, one person fluent in the respective foreign language.

To ensure a pool of qualified faculty and staff over time, APUE and OSA have committed funds to invest in the training of two to three individuals each year. Training primarily consists of shadowing a program team from initial planning through the ac-

tual program. In this fashion, a system has been developed that brings new talent into the pool and allows faculty and staff to cycle in and out of programs as their time and other university commitments allow.

Finally, over the past several years, FSA lead staff from OSA and APUE have developed a series of training workshops that take place during spring semester and cover topics ranging from program logistics to student development and design of suitable on-site activities and academic assignments. A strong focus has been on sensitizing program leaders to the specific needs of first-year students and on preparing them for the unique requirements and features of the on-site faculty and support staff roles. Program faculty and staff also participate in MSU’s mandatory emergency preparedness and response seminars.

The Key to Success: Cross-Campus Collaboration

Thus far, 781 students have participated in programs in eight different locations. The first cohort in 2003–04 enrolled 55 students, and by 2008–09 enrollment had reached 182 students.

Effective collaboration with a wide variety of offices and units across campus lies at the heart of the FSA success story. APUE, OSA’s primary partner for FSAs, serves as the sponsoring academic unit, identifies program faculty, and ensures consistency with on-campus freshman seminar philosophy as well as related policies and procedures. The department of Residential and Hospitality Services plays a crucial role in the on-campus portion of the programs, including provisions for out-of-state students arriving prior to the first day of orientation. The Career Services Network contributes staff time and expertise to the required follow-up sessions during fall semester. The university’s Writing Center and Health Education Services have assisted with predeparture programming. The Student Life department has provided assistance with regard to codes of conduct and disciplinary procedures. Units and academic departments across the university have contributed talented teaching and support staff. Special scholarships have been



made available by APUE, OSA, the Office of Financial Aid, and the Honors College.

The Office of Admissions has been a key partner in marketing the FSA programs. Among other activities, information about the FSAs is presented during admissions recruitment trips; beginning in January, students admitted to MSU for the following fall semester receive e-mail messages about the year’s program line-up; and over the course of most of the spring semester, the FSAs are part of daily presentations by former participants to admitted students visiting the MSU campus. A brief survey administered to all participants reveals increasing “word-of-mouth” marketing from past participants (and their parents) to younger friends and siblings. MSU’s reputation among freshly admitted students for education abroad also factors into the growing popularity of the FSAs. A 2009 MSU Office of Admissions survey of admitted freshmen showed that “study abroad opportunities” tops the list of MSU characteristics most often rated as “excellent/very good.”

In terms of administrative complexity, one of the challenges is that these programs take place during MSU’s summer semester, yet are designed for students admitted for fall. The Office of the Registrar has been instrumental in working out a way to consider the FSAs fall semester programs for purposes of matriculation, enrollment, and financial aid. The high degree of cross-campus collaboration this effort has enjoyed

illustrates MSU's deep institutional commitment to finding creative solutions for unique education abroad programming.

Program Review

Past assessment efforts have primarily been qualitative and include debriefing sessions with various stakeholder groups, annual reports, insights gained from postreturn sessions with students, and focus groups. In early fall, program teams meet with FSA lead staff from both offices for debriefing sessions regarding the various program features as they relate to student learning and program implementation. This includes the suitability of locations in terms of program objectives, ease of transport, access to essential services, and myriad other issues.

Teaching staff also complete a survey regarding what did and did not work in terms of teaching and student learning, ranging from the adequacy of available classroom space to the overall program structure. Information from all debriefing sessions is taken into consideration when planning the following year's line-up and is shared with future program faculty and staff. Each year's FSA offerings are jointly determined a year ahead of time by OSA and APUE through a review of strategic locations as well as the faculty and staff line-up.

Annual reports are cowritten by FSA lead staff, and strategic planning meetings with leaders of both offices take place at

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regular intervals. This kind of collaborative assessment has resulted in continuous program improvement, such as the following:

- extension of predeparture, on-campus orientation from one-half day to two days;
- development of the specially designed "Unpacking Your FSA" sessions as part of required fall semester participation;
- the determination that, in order best to address students' developmental needs, FSAs need to take place prior to the start of the fall semester; and
- the setting of the maximum program size at 30 participants

Students complete evaluations that provide further information about on-site arrangements as well as on faculty effectiveness and staff performance. Students also provide brief written statements during their "Unpacking Your FSA" sessions.

There is anecdotal evidence that the FSAs are indeed making the transition to college easier for entering freshmen. Out-of-state students especially, who are overrepresented on these programs, seem to benefit from the social and academic networking the FSAs provide.

Of the experience, one student noted: "The most important thing I took from the experience: a better awareness of who I am as an individual and a more nuanced, deeper perspective on the larger world. From this, I expect to have the tools necessary to continue to define my personal identity in the direction I want, beginning with college and the rest of my life."

Participation data indicate that 62 percent of the first cohort participated in at

least one (and up to four) additional education abroad experience before graduating from MSU.

Looking Back to Assess the Future

As MSU looks back over the first seven years of successful FSA programming, the vast majority of past FSA participants are still completing their degrees and have not yet hit the labor market. However, with the first two program cohorts fully graduated, plans are under way to launch an FSA alumni impact assessment agenda that will focus on the programs' effect on students' academic and professional careers. In addition, a more comprehensive assessment plan will combine and enhance the various *qualitative* data collection efforts described earlier while expanding *quantitative* assessment.

MSU has a long history of institutional support at all levels for global engagement. Almost one third of MSU undergraduates participate in one or more of 275 programs offered on all continents. FSA tells the story of institutional commitment to combine the goals of first-year experiences and education abroad. Cross-campus collaboration has benefited program design in both areas (as a result of the FSA success, there are now domestic Freshman Seminars Away).

Freshman Seminars Abroad, by helping to place student development into a global context, have great potential for contributing to students' cognitive, emotional, and social development and for setting them on a course to becoming globally competent contributors to society.

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Author's Note: Information about MSU's Freshman Seminars Abroad is available at <http://studyabroad.msu.edu/frseminar/specifcs.html>. The author wishes to thank Brett Berquist, executive director of MSU's Office of Study Abroad, for his constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

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