

## Faculty Abroad: What Do *These* Innocents Need to Know

**A**S EDUCATION ABROAD PROGRAMS PROLIFERATE, one of the most popular models—but also one of the most controversial—is the faculty-led program. And, to paraphrase Twain, there may be no better way for faculty to find out how they truly feel about teaching—or about travel—than to take a group of students abroad.

Faculty-led programs offer an exciting array of approaches to a rich diversity of subject areas in locations around the world. Both faculty and students bring back new and unusual kinds of knowledge, as well as infectious enthusiasm, to their home campuses. This adds to international awareness, enlivens and enriches discussions both in and outside of the classroom, and promotes a creative and highly positive engagement with the world outside. Faculty-led programs are a wonderful thing!

But there are also unique challenges involved in leading such programs that may be difficult for first-time faculty to fully appreciate before the fact.

Here are a few “rules of the road” to help education abroad professionals guide faculty in planning safe, efficient, and effective programs abroad. Talking with faculty about these rules in the months prior to running a new program may help generate a more substantive and productive dialogue about exactly what is involved in teaching abroad, and hopefully, in so doing ensure that everyone involved—faculty, students, and administrators—has the best, safest, and most enjoyable experience possible.

### Rules of the Road for Faculty Abroad: You’re Not in Kansas Anymore

**1** *Plan ahead.* “Successful study abroad trips are planned well in advance,” says Dawn Turton, executive director of the international office at Vanderbilt University. “The level of planning and organization helps convey to students that this is a well-thought-out academic experience, and not a vacation.” Marshall Eakin, professor of history at Vanderbilt, who has taught programs in Chile and Nicaragua, agrees. The

most difficult thing about teaching abroad, he says, is “Logistics, logistics, logistics,” and adds that “a thorough site visit (or two) is crucial in the planning stages.” Sam Miglarese, who teaches religion at Duke University and created a program based at Venice International University, agrees that careful and thorough advance planning is important, but adds that one of the problems involved in planning programs abroad is that “You can only plan to a certain degree until you know for sure you’re going. And often students leave their plans flexible until the last minute, so you don’t always have the lead time you need to plan optimally.” Setting up administrative support in the host country and seeking advice from colleagues who are experienced in teaching abroad are two of the best strategies faculty can use to create successful programs, and prevent as many problems as possible. But no one taking students abroad should ever expect a problem-free program: that is a highly unrealistic, if not impossible, goal.

**2** *Be aware of the magnitude of responsibility for teachers abroad.* Teaching students abroad is NOT the same as teaching them on campus. This may be the most important thing for faculty to realize before taking on a study abroad assignment. “This is a 24/7 commitment,” says Michael Launius, executive director of the office of international studies and programs at Central Washington University. “Faculty need to know they can be contacted by students at any time and on any issue. This can be a tough adjustment for some.” Margaret Riley, director and associate dean for study abroad at Duke University agrees. “Our faculty who go abroad with students in our summer programs serve not only

“I have found that there ain’t no surer way to find out whether you like people or hate them than to travel with them.”

— MARK TWAIN



as faculty, but as program directors. I don't think some realize until they are in the thick of it just what it means to be more than just the person teaching the class. They accompany students to the hospital if they are ill, deal with late arrivals, lost passports, stolen purses, and restroom breaks on field trips... an infinite list of situations that one can't even fathom." Vanderbilt's Turton adds, "On campus we have a wide range of services, offices, and people who deal with student issues. That is not the case overseas... Faculty may have to deal with student issues such as alcohol consumption, dating, and depression. They need to make sure that they are aware of university procedures and how to respond appropriately when such issues come up."

Personality issues can also present challenges, and can have a potentially devastating effect on programs abroad. "It can be the most compatible group imaginable, or you can have one 'bad apple' that spoils the whole bunch," says Riley. Turton also stresses the importance of group dynamics, saying, "It plays a big role in the success of study abroad programs. Unlike on campus, faculty and students really have to be ready to spend large amounts of time together. If there are personality conflicts, it is important to address them quickly."

Teaching abroad also means being ready to take responsibility quickly and effectively in a crisis. Gary Braglia, director of education abroad at Queens College, CUNY, names crisis management as the most important skill that faculty need to have before taking a group of students on a program. "Faculty need to be able to tell the difference between a real and a perceived crisis, and know what to do in each case," he says, and adds, "Working with a responsible study abroad administrator, or experienced faculty who can train them before they go anywhere, is essential." Launius points out that while risk management is a matter of prime concern for administrators, it may be something faculty are not used to thinking about. "Faculty are not always as aware of the risk profiles, and the exposures of institutions, as perhaps they should be," he says, adding, "All institutions are now well aware of the importance of managing risk."

**3** *Be flexible.* Research tells us that one of the greatest benefits students gain through study abroad is learning how to "deal with ambiguity." Teaching abroad requires the same ability, and it is rare that a faculty person abroad will not have plenty of chances to provide students with a good role model for how to respond quickly, creatively, and graciously to unanticipated problems. Faculty who are teaching abroad for the first time may be caught off-guard by just how many ways and in how many different types of situations this ability may prove key to the success of their program. "The necessity of dealing with a variety of student needs and issues may not surface until one is in the field," says Launius, mentioning the challenges of dealing with vegetarian diets, religious prohibitions for traveling on certain days of the week, and student reactions to squat toilets as just a few examples. "Faculty need to be flexible and creative in solving these sorts of problems," he says. Turton points out that even the classroom part of the experience can present unexpected challenges for teachers. "Faculty may not realize the extent to which they rely on technology until they are in a location where it is less accessible," she says. "This can apply to things like photocopying as well as the more obvious ones like the Internet."

While faculty can't prepare for every conceivable problem that might occur, they should assume that teaching abroad will present at least a few situations that will require quick thinking on the spot to avoid having minor (or major) inconveniences derail the class. Bringing along a few essential supplies—chalk and whiteboard markers, paper clips, exam booklets, and other basics they are accustomed to finding in the department office—can help minimize minor annoyances. For bigger, more complex problems, there's nothing like an indomitable attitude and irrepressible good spirits to help carry the day. Complaining to students about conditions in the host country or at the local host institution, or blaming administrators back home for not having foreseen the unforeseeable, won't benefit anyone. Being flexible

enough to solve the problem on the spot with creative thinking and a can-do spirit will.

**4** *Be available to students, but also be clear about the limits of faculty responsibility, and the extent of the students' responsibility for themselves.* Solving new kinds of problems for themselves is one of the most important learning opportunities that study abroad offers students. Students will quite naturally try to get on-site faculty to solve problems for them, but faculty should resist the temptation to interfere in this very important part of the educational process. Students need to know that they will be backed up in situations where they have tried earnestly and unsuccessfully to solve problems for themselves, but they should appeal to faculty only as a last resort in all but emergency situations. It's also important for faculty to know how to draw the line between being available to students and being overly involved in their social and personal lives. "I didn't want to relate to them like a camp counselor," Migliare says, "but I did make it clear I was available to them...they knew I was nearby and they could find me easily if they needed to." It's also important to keep the boundaries that separate faculty from students well-defined and ever-present. Education abroad presents abundant opportunity for those boundaries to be blurred, and can lead to all kinds of problems, from the mildly annoying to the catastrophic.

**5** *Be patient, and hold onto your sense of humor.* Some of the funniest passages in the annals of travel literature describe real-life situations that were probably not very funny at the time that the authors—from Laurence Sterne and Mark Twain to James Thurber and Bill Bryson—were experiencing them. Faculty should be patient with the annoyances that are an inevitable part of the rich experience of travel, and hold onto their senses of humor—they'll need them! It's important for faculty to remember at all times that one of the most important things they can teach their students abroad, by their example, is how to remain unflappable even when there's plenty to flap about.

**6** *Have fun!* Despite the rolled eyes, exaggerated winks, and expressions of mock sympathy that tend to greet the announcement of a teaching abroad assignment, faculty should not be fooled: teaching abroad is a huge responsibility, and it's a lot of work.

But with the right attitude and a spirit of adventure, it can also provide faculty—and students—with some of the most rewarding academic and travel experiences they have ever had. And it can—and should—be fun!

"There's such an opportunity to add color and flavor to cross-cultural or international studies," Launius says. "It's like the difference between reading about French pastries versus actually eating some in a Paris street café," adding, "There is no better way to motivate students." According to Riley, "the ability [for faculty] to work so closely and intensely with a group of students and to immerse themselves in another culture is the greatest reward." And there are personal benefits for faculty as well. "Without a doubt, my stay in France was one of the lifetime high points for me and for my family," says Michael Bess, chancellor's professor of history at Vanderbilt, who taught in Aix en Provence.

### An Unparalleled Opportunity

Education abroad can open the world to faculty and students in vastly exciting and

unprecedented ways. "Studying abroad can be a life-changing experience for students, and I think the same can be said for teaching abroad," Turton says. "Teaching students abroad gives faculty an opportunity to rediscover what they love about teaching as well as what they love about their subject."

With adequate preparation and plenty of advance planning, faculty will be in the best position to create an education abroad experience that is rewarding both for their students and for themselves. But they should also remember that part of what they are signing up for is adventure, and never lose sight of that fact. To return to the words of Mark Twain, when it comes time to embark, they should be prepared to "... throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in [their] sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

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**JANET HULSTRAND** is a freelance writer and editor based in Silver Spring, Maryland. She created and has taught literature programs in Paris, Florence, and Hawaii for the Education Abroad programs at Hunter and Queens Colleges (CUNY). Her most recent *IE* article was "Educating for Global Business" in the September/October 2007 issue.

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