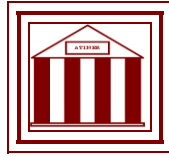


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ATINER's Conference Paper Series
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**Going Global:
Preparing College Students for Travel Abroad**

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
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Going Global: Preparing College Students for Travel Abroad

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Abstract

Many college students, from across the United States, will have the opportunity to experience other cultures through overseas programs that are offered at their respective colleges and universities during their tenure on campus. These educational and service programs (often called “Travel Abroad” or “Semester Abroad”) have the potential to be beneficial for both the students and the cultures/peoples they come into contact with. However, the opposite may also be true; the experience could be detrimental and even dangerous for those same people if adequate preparations are not considered.

Preparing students for the mental and physical challenges that they will encounter during their travel abroad must be a top priority for the administrators of international programs. A mandatory preparation phase, that occurs before the trip commences, can alleviate anxiety and prevent problems that may arise. The depth and quality of such preparatory programs is a critical element to the success for all those involved. Facilitating 13 years of international travel programs for college students, and conducting research on the perceptions of student readiness led to the writing of this paper. Insights and data from four international travel destinations (India, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia), along with current research, were used to facilitate important considerations regarding our pre-departure travel abroad programs.

The goal of this paper is to share data, insights, and findings with others who are interested in being intentional about building a sound program for travel abroad that is mutually beneficial to all those involved.

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Sending students around the world through study-abroad travel programs has been a popular and highly valued option at Alma College where I currently teach. Most participants note that their experiences in these multicultural locations leave a lasting impact on them and change their perspective of the world and their place in it. These programs also allow students to gain an international perspective that is impossible to duplicate in any classroom setting or virtual tour. Boyd (2004) concurs, “Simulations cannot be compared to study abroad courses...” (p. 67). I firmly believe that studying abroad is an extremely effective way to improve a student’s ability with foreign language, develop a deep understanding of other cultures, and awaken an awareness and appreciation for life in our own country.

This paper endeavors to help individuals who are interested in improving or developing a pre-departure program for students interested in traveling abroad. I start by providing the reader with points and/or issues that help lay a solid foundation for any travel abroad program. Lastly, I offer a pre-departure schedule, complete with eight sessions, that has worked well for me over the past 12 years in my short and long term travel abroad experiences.

My international studies experience has overwhelmingly shown that students who travel abroad gain a better grasp of the world in which they live and their place in it. Countless times, I hear personal accounts from students who explain that their travel experiences helped them realize how fortunate they are to live in the United States, and that they no longer take things for granted like family, food, safety, and sanitation conditions. At the same time, students often realized that their perspective of the world was very limited, and this change in thinking often changed their lives. In essence, life no longer revolved around the students themselves, or was focused on the American habits they had grown accustomed to; their experience provided them with a new understanding and appreciation for the life they live, and built a greater sense of openness and acceptance for others in this world (McGowan, 2007). Zhai and Scheer (2002) concur and state that students often, “...saw how much the United States influences other countries” and “...gained appreciation, respect, and understanding of their host country and culture” (p.26). They go on to claim that “75% of the students believed that their study abroad experience was a great confidence builder for them; the confidence came from being able to survive in such different countries, the coping and travel skills they gained, and the ability to share their experience and knowledge with others.” (p.25) There is no question that increasing college students’ global awareness through travel abroad programs has benefits for those involved.

Offering our students these incredible opportunities can be valuable and rewarding, however, we must be very intentional about our preparatory programs in order to insure that our students get the most out of their experience. If we fail to adequately prepare our students, the trip may lack purpose and also be potentially detrimental or even dangerous for the student, their host family and others as well. Tritz (1997) understands this point and suggests that the success of the international experience is highly dependent upon the preparation that students receive before they travel abroad. Carey (2002) goes on and notes that we must have “intelligent preparation” to make sure that the students’ experiences are successful and satisfying. I whole-heartedly agree with both Tritz (1997) and Carey (2002) and suggest that “intelligent preparation” must begin with a close look at the specific resources we have access to in our own International Studies Office on campus.

A solid pre-departure program should initially begin with an investigation into what types of resources are available at our own institutions. Many faculty members or group leaders are unaware that specific resources are available on campus, but most colleges do have some sort of “International” or “Off Campus Studies Office” that may have already

developed an appropriate foundation for any pre-departure program. At Alma College, the Off Campus Studies Office has a seven-step procedure that can be used by students who travel abroad. Students will:

- a. Research and select a program of interest and officially registrar.
- b. Complete initial forms (basic information).
- c. Give detailed information regarding eligibility and safety: emergency contacts, GPA, financial considerations, medical release, disability and background check to identify problems such as alcohol/drug abuse or mental health issues (while on campus).
- d. Meet with director of Off Campus Program to initiate application process.
- e. Attend a mandatory orientation.

Utilizing the Off Campus Studies Office has helped me to identify and prevent many potential problems in other ways than those mentioned above. At times, some countries are placed on a travel advisory list, indicating that there may be a potential danger for American citizens, and the Off Campus Studies Office is constantly updating itself with this important information. Another potential problem that offices such as these can help is in the area of medications. If a leader is rushed, he or she may overlook the mental health of their students who travel abroad with them. College students may seek assistance in this area during their travel time, and it is critical that we are prepared to help. Christiana Groth, a risk analyst for United Educators, which insures more than 800 colleges and providers, claims that when students go abroad “stresses are likely to intensify and access to quality (mental health) care may be limited”. As an example, in some countries, certain medications (such as Adderall which treats attention deficit/hyperactivity) are banned. In my case, and after getting council from the International Office, I conveyed to my students with any preexisting medical problem they must carry a letter from the family doctor that explains their condition and lists prescription medications and the generic alternative to those drugs. During travel abroad, medications must be packed in their original containers and clearly labeled. Students and their families were informed to also check with the foreign embassy of that country to be sure required medications are not considered narcotics and are therefore illegal (The following sites can be very useful for finding more information about medical concerns).

- http://travel.state.gov/travel/tips/brochures/brochures_1215.html (For general information about each country regarding medical treatment, filling a prescription, and access to a U.S. consular to help assist in locating medical services.)
- <http://www.state.gov/s/cpr/rls/dpl/32122.htm> (For information regarding preexisting medical problems and if required medications are considered illegal.)

Medical concerns must be an issue that group leaders are prepared for, and the International Studies Office can be a tremendous help. Another valuable role is that of crisis management. One recent example was during my May 2011 trip to Peru; a female student became extremely dehydrated and needed immediate medical attention including an IV. Our International Studies Office was paramount in communicating with insurance companies and keeping parents informed during this difficult time. What was especially helpful was the plan of action that had been developed before we left. This put all of our minds at ease in knowing that lines of communication were open, there was an effective plan in place, and that anyone involved could get the help they needed. I have greatly benefited from the expertise and

wealth of knowledge that the International Office provides, and strongly recommend that any trip leader examine this resource first.

Considering the growing popularity of short-term study abroad trips, and the potential pressures to quickly recruit students into these programs, there may be a tendency for leaders to develop travel abroad programs without adequate preparation. Patricia Martin, associate director of study abroad at the University of Pennsylvania has seen this tendency and states, “there is such a rush to do things...without looking at the infrastructure...you have to support it.” The importance for leaders to give full consideration to adequate preparation, starting with on-campus infrastructures like an International Office, is vital. Being fully prepared, before leaving the country, is a great place to start, even before the packing begins.

A second important aspect of any pre-departure program involves the idea of developing critical reflection strategies with the students. Teaching them how to “pack” (being able to develop critical reflection skills before they go), and then “unpack” (using those skills to identify key points that enhanced the success of their international experience) can make a world of difference. When I talk to my students about “packing” and “unpacking” for the trip, I am referring to their ability to critically reflect in ways that can positively impact their lives, including future plans. If the students are not given a chance for deep and meaningful times of reflection, they may have difficulty expressing the impact that the experience made on their lives. These students may claim that it was “fun” and the overseas trip felt like a “vacation” and they “learned a lot”, but they have a harder time expressing deeper and more important issues. If, however, students are able to connect their travel experience to “contexts” (such as work or personal growth areas) and apply what they learned, then the benefit will be to the fullest. In order to do this, students must be guided toward pre-established points, and asked key questions during purposeful discussion sessions of “packing” before they go in order to clearly focus on a deeper and more meaningful purpose. They then engage in an “unpacking” workshop when they return home, so that they can critically reflect on those points with a new perspective. These purposeful times of self-reflection can relate positively to their personal growth, and even their future employment.

A research brief developed by CERI (Collegiate Employment Research Institute - Research Brief 1-2008, Michigan State University) rightly claims that many colleges advertise the importance of travel abroad for future work opportunities, especially during times of recruiting or hiring. However, current findings by CERI also suggest that employers actually put a low importance on study abroad as compared to other activities. Many assume, including international study abroad offices and trip leaders, that having a study abroad experience naturally benefits students on the employment front. CERI’s data, however, indicates that most students are unable to articulate their international experience in ways that are meaningful to employers and suggests, “study abroad has value to employers but students must *unpack* or critically reflect on their international academic experiences and reframe their stories in the context of the workplace” (Pg.2). The focus must be on behaviors and competencies, not just the experience itself.

In a survey, completed by CERI in 2004, 450 employers were asked to identify specific traits that made some recent hires (those who had international experience) different from others (those who did not have international experience). Four traits were considered highly valuable, including:

- Ability to interact with people who hold different interests/values/perspectives
- Understanding cultural differences in the workplace
- Adapting to situations of change

- Gaining new knowledge from experiences

Employers also suggested that recent hires with international experiences excelled in the following ways, as compared to their peers without the experience:

- Ability to work independently, and yet effectively with others
- Being able to undertake tasks that are unfamiliar/risky
- Being able to apply information in new or broader contexts
- Identifying new problems/solutions to problems

Employers were very clear in stating that simply traveling abroad *did not guarantee* that these competencies would develop, but the value of the study abroad program depended on the ability to reflect on the experience and apply it to a work situation. In order for this to occur, students must attend workshops or seminars where they participate in focused activities that identify and foster appropriate behaviors and competencies gained during the travel experiences. CERI's re-entry program, *Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experience*, is a workshop that lasts for approximately 2 hours. The following information is a brief account of a CERI workshop at Michigan State University for those that traveled abroad; students were given four items to focus on:

- Skills and competencies that are important to employers (15-20 minutes)
 - Shifting the focus away from academics and toward the workplace
 - Discussion about specific competencies preferred by employers
 - Key skills are defined in the context of the workplace
 - Skills/competencies associated with the study abroad are introduced
- Authentic reflective practice exercises (time varies, dependent on enrollment)
 - Brief introduction of authentic reflective practices (10 minutes)
 - Students are given suggestions for engaging in real, not faked, reflections
 - Groups of students volunteer for a debriefing (unpacking) experience; key skills or competencies are practiced (30 minutes per student group)
- Debriefing the unpacking exercises
 - After connections are made to personal career goals/interests, students typically can create a list of items describing knowledge and skills gained that they can incorporate into a resume or personal statement.
 - Each interview is customized to help the student think about their experience in new ways, tailored toward their intended career trajectory.
 - The goal is to probe for depth, to help the student increase conscious learning, to transfer skills, and to articulate meaning backed with concrete examples that can be used in interviews with employers.
- Wrap-up exercises (30 minutes)
 - Students participate in "unpacking exercises" with their peers. (This mimics the reflective steps that were introduced earlier by the leader.)
 - Students are taught ways to present skills/competencies on resumes and during interviews.

These workshop ideas challenge the students to consider the deeper meaning of their study abroad experience, and analyze how it may have helped them develop academically, culturally, professionally, and personally. Though this style of debriefing or unpacking may not fit all pre-departure programs, I believe that reflection exercises of some sort are a critical component for any travel abroad experience.

Another foundational point for preparation involves clear and effective communication capabilities with parents and family members during the travel experience. Knowing that the availability of Internet access for email, and phone use for international calling will be different in foreign countries, the trip leader must develop a plan, well in advance. One resource that I have found very helpful is to create a webpage that can be accessed through Wikipedia. Dr. McNally, computer professor and colleague from Alma College, introduced me to this form of communication, and we trained our group of college students before leaving for a short-term travel abroad experience to Cusco, Peru. Students set up their account before leaving campus by creating a brief information page that included their career focus and goals for their trip. We included an introductory disclaimer stating that Internet access would depend on availability at our destination sites. Each day one student was responsible to write a travel log that documented our location, our activities, and pictures of things we experienced during the day. Parents could log onto the same site to learn what we were doing, view pictures, and read the dialog of what the students were experiencing. It also allowed the leaders to see through the eyes of the student; their narratives and pictures showed us what they were learning and revealed their reactions to the country. These travel logs initiated daily discussions with our students, and were great opportunities to address the “packing” and “unpacking” of information that they were gleaming from the trip. Parents could communicate with their son or daughter by making comments on the log, much like posting on a Face book page. Dr. McNally stated,

"Probably the most important aspect of the Wiki was giving the students an opportunity to express themselves during the trip, both textually and through the photos they were taking. Families, friends, and the Alma College community could follow along as we participated in South American culture."

I found the “Wiki” to be extremely user friendly and very beneficial for all parties involved. You may view more specifics and experience our 2007 trip to Peru by visiting the following site: www.mcs.alma.edu. You must choose: Spring Term Courses –Peru Spring Term 2009: *STC 002: Language & Service in the Andes*. While everyone is invited to browse the site, editing is restricted to class members only.

Another valuable information source, that can be easily overlooked, should be the advice of directors, educators and liaisons from the destination countries. I have had the pleasure to work alongside four different liaisons and directors of programs that we have utilized when traveling abroad in Peru, India, Bolivia and Ecuador. The wealth of information that these experts shared was very helpful to me as I planned future trips. Each director was willing to complete a survey I created, that asked questions like:

- “What do you see in American students, especially those from Alma College, that may indicate inadequate preparation for participation in your programs?”
- “What concerns do you have about foreign students who come, and appear to

be somewhat unprepared?”

- “What advice could you give us for better preparing our students to travel abroad, with special consideration for your location?”

Four main themes, or ‘recommendations’, emerged from these surveys, which impacted our students’ success as they traveled, and also spoke to the safety of the local people while our American students visited their schools, homes and marketplaces.

The *first recommendation* involved the need for students to know more about the heritage and history of that culture, including different behaviors. Cultural values and behaviors exist for good reasons; the more we understand them and show tolerance for the differences, the more we learn and grow. Initially, students may observe behaviors that differ from their own and react negatively. One example of this was evident in India: male friends often walk hand in hand as they converse in public. This made some of my students shriek in disbelief, simply because they did not fully understand the cultural norms for behavior. Another example was the difference in food habits, such as the Peruvian heritage of eating guinea pigs; some students turned up their noses to such an idea, yet others were willing to try new things without judging or criticizing. Students must realize that just because things may be different, they are not “bad”, “wrong” or “weird”. At the very least students must acknowledge their own personal need to develop patience and tolerance for cultural differences, without showing pride or contempt.

The *second recommendation* was being able to “roll with the punches” and practice flexibility during stressful times. Many things can happen unexpectedly or differently than in the United States, and living in a different culture provides a great learning opportunity to practice patience. Most of our foreign directors indicated that the fast pace of the American lifestyle is often shown in our students’ attitudes. Too many times our students held unrealistic, American expectations for foreigners, like taxis that arrived late, meetings that didn’t start on time, or food prepared in different ways. Students lost patience, which quickly led to frustration and then disappointment. One liaison stated that, “they (our students) might as well pack up and go home because they have unfortunately made an expectation we can not meet...we are not America, and we are not fast-tracked American people”.

The *third recommendation* simply focused on the lack of respect. The liaisons gave several examples when students did things that shocked their teachers, host families and international peers. The liaison from Ecuador stated, “it is always the American student in our classes that puts feet up on the table, is dressed inappropriately, or just sits there while the rest of the class stands to greet the instructor for the day”. Another liaison gave the example of a student who went home to their host family in the evening and shut the door to their bedroom, isolating themselves away from the family, then went on to say that many “American students often complain about the food within ear shot of the host mom or dad in some format”. Showing a lack respect, to the point of rudeness, is unacceptable and reflects poorly on our country as a whole.

The *final recommendation* revolved around irresponsibility and immaturity with drugs, alcohol or unnecessary risks (such as walking alone at night) in unfamiliar locations, or with people they’ve just met. The liaisons expressed that most students (not just Americans) took risks with drugs or alcohol to a point that jeopardized their own safety, or that of their group. All liaisons and directors claimed that alcohol was the main factor in most negative student issues, and unfortunate incidents had occurred so many times that they “lost count”. They explained that when they had helped students through traumatic issues, like rape, robbery, lost passports, or unannounced visits from strangers, most had occurred due to

students choosing to take unnecessary risks.

In order to minimize, as much as possible, the occurrence of these risk-taking behaviors, I have developed trip policies that my students must agree to follow. All of the previously stated research data should also be considered when formulating your own pre-departure schedules, which cannot guarantee student safety, but encourages them to be alert to certain things during their travels and to heed the concerns of experienced people who have seen unfortunate things occur. As you develop your own pre-departure preparation goals, consider these five by Grove (1989):

- To help students focus on their own culture (values and behaviors)
- To help students develop realistic expectations
- To help ease pre-departure anxiety
- To describe the program and system of expected behaviors
- To give practical and logistical information

I would add four additional ones:

- To allow students to research, examine, and compare cultural norms and behaviors associated with the country we are traveling to
- To introduce students to some basics about the language spoken in our destination country
- To create reflection time on identified issues, or “unpack” what they have experienced
- To facilitate student reflection on and appreciate for what they have here in the United States of America

After setting some clear goals, it is time to consider a schedule that allows ample time to achieve things mentioned thus far. I start early enough in the academic year to complete eight workshops that I deem as ‘critical’ for the students’ well-being and to build an understanding of the culture they are going to be experiencing. It is important to start early enough to allow time for student recruitment, chaperone training, travel arrangements, and finalization of trip finances.

Once the initial trip logistics are finalized, I begin the 8 sessions and 2 packing workshops (“How to Pack” and “Unpacking your Trip”). All sessions are mandatory and are completed before students travel. The goal of each session is to predict, discuss, reflect, and learn as much as possible before we travel. Each session lasts for 2 1/2 to 3 hours, and typically has the following key components:

- A main topic, including time for questions and answers
- Guest speaker time may include: trip chaperones, students who have traveled with me in the past, the on-campus nurse, or local people who are also citizens of our travel destination
- Time for language development/acquisition opportunities
- A slide show, from prior trips, to show visual representations of our destination.
- A group presentation by the student participants over pre-assigned segments, such as: geography, education, flora/fauna, specific sites of interest, economics (the topic usually matches each student’s area of interest or career choice)

The following is a more detailed itinerary that I have used in the past, and is easily achievable if your program starts in November and continues in a timely fashion throughout

the academic school year. My meetings are held later at night (8 – 10 p.m.), due to the time constraints of students' class schedules.

Session # 1: Main Topic: Purpose and Logistics.

- Costs, locations, detailed schedule of trip, options and choices
- Meet the chaperones and discuss their roles

“Packing Workshop”: This 1-hour workshop encourages students to look at key questions they should try to answer during their travels abroad. Students are encouraged to develop “contextual” questions about specific issues (what they want to understand about themselves or their future throughout this experience). These questions may help a future employer see an added value in them, if hired.

Session #2: Main Topic: Passports/Visas/Immunizations

- Trip rules and Host family group selections
- Student Group Presentation #1 - Geography, Flora and Fauna
- Guest Speaker: “Use of free time”
- Language Acquisition Exercise

Session #3: Main Topic: Selection Service/Free Time Options/Culture

- Student Group Presentation #2 - History and Cultural Specifics
- Guest Speaker: “Volunteer service opportunities and trip options”
- Language Acquisition Exercise

Session #4: Main Topic: Currency/Spending Money/Tipping

- Student Group Presentation #3 - Economics and Political Highlights
- Guest Speaker: “Obtaining and spending money, and tipping”
- Language Acquisition Exercise

Session #5: Main Topic: Safety, Health/Sickness, Diet/Clothes

- Student Group Presentation #4 - Education and Family Issues
- Guest Speaker: “Safety, food, water, and clothes”
- Language Acquisition Exercise

Session #6: Main Topic: Transportation Issues (Car/Taxi/Bus/Horse)

- Student Group Presentation #5 - Native People Groups
- Guest Speaker: “Host family living”
- Language Acquisition Exercise

Session #7: Main Topic: Host Families and Living Arrangements

- Student Group Presentation #6 - Specific Trip Sites
- Guest Speaker: “Perceptions of trip sites”
- Language Acquisition Exercise

Session #8: Final Topic: Culture Shock/Packing/Final Details

- Guest Speaker: “Culture Shock and Home Sickness”
- Language Acquisition Exercise

“Unpacking Workshop”: This workshop takes place after the student returns to campus. It is critical to allow time for the student to reflect on the experience. We want to

“unpack” what they have learned and be able to apply it to contextual situations (i.e. future job, graduate school, etc.). Whole group discussions take place where each student has the chance to share their reflections and apply them to their future. Ideas are generated about ways to use the experience they’ve gained on a resume, during a job interview, or in their area of employment.

In summary, there is no question we are becoming a more travel-orientated society. In my estimation, as our students become more globalized it is vitally important that they have a beneficial knowledge of other cultures other than just having “fun” by experiencing intentionally designed travel abroad programs. While both short and long-term situations can be incredibly impactful on our students by providing life-changing experiences, we must also realize the potential of overwhelming, daunting and dangerous situations if appropriate preparations are not made. Our students need more than just a “fun vacation” where they learn and see “ tons of neat stuff”. Growing personally, academically and professionally doesn’t occur by happenstance. We must have a well thought out pre-departure program that: helps our students learn specifics about the culture they plan on visiting, teaches basic language acquisition, and allows time for personal reflection. Our time abroad must be intentional toward the goals that we identified, and must take into consideration the wise counsel of our international liaisons and directors. Upon returning to our home campus, we must allow time for reflection, articulation, and application of what was learned to our future goals. In essence, travel abroad programs must be purposeful during the preparation stage, enjoyable during the travel stage, and reflective during the return stage. In this manner, after “going global” and taking groups of students abroad, we can rest in knowing that we have done our best to assure the safety and growth of everyone involved.

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