

The Globalization of Community Colleges

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The “junior year or semester abroad” is a stereotype that is as applicable to community colleges as a 500 student lecture hall. When one profiles the community college student on campuses across the country, we are likely to find a 28 year old part time learner who is working an average of 20 hours per week. This student is more likely to be female than male and is probably a first generation college student. The thought of spending even a semester abroad is a foreign concept to this learner.

Even the younger full-time learner at a community college would have difficulty “getting away” for an extended period of time. This is due to the cost of the time away from employment opportunities. Many community college students need to work year round to fund the cost of their education and lifestyle.

This clearly places community colleges in a dilemma. The need for a broad global perspective is an increasingly acknowledged component in a student’s education but there is so little time (and money) for the cost of a traditional study abroad experience.

Some community colleges have met this challenge by creating shorter-term study abroad opportunities for their students. At Middlesex Community College (Bedford/Lowell, Massachusetts) we have created four short-term study abroad fellowship programs. When designing our programs one of the most important criteria was student access. Community colleges are institutions of access. It is therefore an important value that this access exists for all activities at a community college.

This of course presented us with a challenge – how do you create student access, keep costs to a minimum and also provide a quality program? If these were not seemingly insurmountable challenges we decided to add one more—the country with whom the first program would be developed was the People’s Republic of China. Why not choose England, France, Italy or some other country where travel arrangements would be easy to make? The best response I can provide 10 years later is we had an opportunity and there was significant interest in Asia on both campuses. We had just been designated by the East-West Center at the University of Hawai’i as

an Asian Studies Regional Development Center. Additionally, Lowell the site of one of our campuses, had recently experienced a significant population change with the recent arrival of an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 Southeast Asians. An Asian country became the logical choice for us.

Through a series of seemingly unrelated events, I had found myself a year earlier sitting in a hotel lobby in Jinan, Shandong Province in the People’s Republic of China, having a conversation with senior officials from the Shandong Tourism Bureau. We were discussing their desire to attract more tourists especially from the United States. One “solution” that I offered was what was needed is more familiarity with the United States and a deeper understanding of American values toward cleanliness, neatness, accommodations, etc.

I offered, “It would be wonderful if we could provide training to some of your employees. We have both a Travel and Tourism Program and a Hotel Restaurant Management Program. Why not have some of your employees come to Middlesex to study?” Cost was their immediate response.

I quickly responded “What if we provided scholarships to these students?” Slowly but surely the plan began to fall into place. We would provide a scholarship for two employees of the travel service for an academic year and cover their living expenses. The travel service would provide a study tour for 12 students and two faculty escorts for two and a half weeks. The study tour would include Beijing, Qingdao, Jinan, Qufu, Shanghai and Hong Kong. All costs of hotels, meals, travel guides and admissions would be covered by the travel service.

The missing link was the international airfare. The Student Union Government Association (SUGA) at Middlesex had expressed an interest in international opportunities for students. A presentation of the proposed program with China was made. SUGA agreed to fund the air tickets. They have done this for the last 10 years.

Shortly after reaching the agreement we had to design the program, develop a student selection process, appoint a selection committee, publicize the program, design application forms and much more.

All had to be established. The selection process including forms, criteria (GPA and number of credits earned) and the selection committee were pulled together. After several very intense days of interviewing and even greater intensity for the final selection process, all the pieces fell into place. We had our dozen fellows.

It became very apparent early in the selection process that our fellows were not seasoned travelers. Most did not have passports, many had never flown, and those who had flown, had flown to Orlando. Significant time was devoted to “Travel Ed101.” Basics such as what to pack, what to carry on, are hair dryers needed? do we tip?, etc. It was even more important that we prepare them intellectually. A philosophy professor who was very knowledgeable about Confucius was selected. This was important since the fellows would spend three days in Qufu, Confucius’ birth and burial place. A course focusing on Chinese history, society, social institutions, government, arts and economy was developed. The course met for 18 hours prior to departure. The fellows also gained insights by a visit to the Asia galleries at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, a tour of Boston’s Chinatown, enjoying an authentic multicourse banquet without silverware, and viewing Chinese film.

The fellows experience for many was life changing. It was often described as “one of the highlights of my life.” We realized our judgment was accurate and three weeks was the optimum length of time. Significant signs of homesickness developed for many of the fellows after two weeks. We also discovered the importance of building group cohesion. Three weeks of travel under sometimes stressful conditions can sometimes cause tempers to flare, and they did.

In response to some of the group dynamics problems that occurred, we instituted an all day retreat which all fellows and all faculty escorts must attend. The retreat stresses team-building exercises designed to build group cohesiveness.

New Fellowship Programs

Since our original program with the People’s Republic of China, we have added three additional fellowship programs for our students—Europe, The Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland and a Spanish speaking country.

The European program is a partnership with the Noordelijke Hogeschool Leeuwarden (NHL) in the Netherlands. Every year, NHL implements a two week institute for 100 students from colleges and univer-

sities throughout Europe. The institute is built around a common theme such as crossing borders or water. The institute’s location varies from year to year. One year it was the Netherlands, Germany, France and Italy. Another year it was Austria, Hungary, Romania and yet another it was the Netherlands.

For the last three years we have had a program with a Spanish speaking country. For two years it was Costa Rica and this year it was Spain. This program is different from the others since it occurs in January. The other programs occur at different times throughout the summer. The programs are spaced out throughout the year to ease the administrative burden.

In 2000, we added our fourth fellowship program – the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This was an outgrowth of our Wider Horizons Program which brings recent teacher college graduates from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to participate in a program focusing on peace and reconciliation. This has proven to be our most popular fellowship program. Given the Greater Boston region’s large Irish heritage population, it is no surprise that this program was so popular.

Lessons Learned

We have been designing and implementing the above short-term study abroad programs for 10 years. During this period, we have learned some valuable lessons we would like to pass on to our colleagues:

- **Access, access, access.** Community colleges are institutions of access. Your study abroad programs should also provide that access. Programs that have high costs or require a semester of even six weeks abroad create barriers that are difficult if not impossible for many community college students to overcome. The program’s design should carefully consider the needs and lifestyles of your students.

- **The program’s education value.** There are critics who refer to short term (one to three week) study abroad programs as “academic tourism.” Their rationale is how can one learn about a country or its people in such a brief period of time? If there is a strong academic component built into the experience, short-term programs can be dynamic, thought provoking and life-changing experiences.

- **Our students are Neophytes when it comes to travel.** Many of our students are inexperienced travelers. It is our responsibility to not only prepare our students intellectually, but also to prepare them to be travel savvy: to understand that packing light is

not a phrase, but a necessity; to always carry valuables on their person, and to also carry one days' travel needs on the flight in case baggage is delayed, etc.

- **The selection process and criteria should be clear and well publicized.** Academic communities can be highly politicized environments. The selection process should be broad based and the established criteria should be rigorously adhered to. If you require 12 earned credits to apply do not interview a student with nine.

- **Positive group dynamics are critical and should not be overlooked.** When a group of near strangers is traveling together, occasional friction between people is inevitable. When assembling the participants consider group dynamics. After all, there is no tribal council.

What does the future hold? Community colleges have been engaged in the global education movement for a little more than a decade. The number of programs and participants will only increase. Increasingly, the community college movement is realizing the value of study abroad. Lourdene Huhra, Executive Dean, Bunker Hill Community College remarked: "Community college students are increasingly seeing the value of the skills gained through the study abroad experience. With the availability of student grants and other financial supports, study abroad opportunities at community colleges will only grow."