

Partner or Perish—Study Abroad in the 21st Century

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Introduction

These are days of rapid transition in the wide world of study abroad and international exchange programs. We are involved with a proliferation of new programs as “global education” becomes a more mainstream term in higher education.

This rapid expansion of programs has an unusual characteristic to it, at least at most institutions. That characteristic is the negative correlation between increasing programs and increasing budgets. It seems that the more interest there is in study abroad programs, the wider the gap grows between the number of programs offered and the resources committed to coordinating them. This gap reflects the broader issues of public support for higher education combined with the problem of translating institutional rhetoric in support of international education into an increased funding priority on the campus.

The new realities

As we deal with more programs and a stagnant budget, we need to recognize some new realities. The days of expanding programs from a campus base are coming to a close. Universities cannot afford to duplicate programs around the world. That is not cost-effective now and it will become less so as we try to respond to the increasingly diverse nature of student interests. A 21st century university needs to have international program opportunities in all major parts of the world. This requires an infrastructure beyond the capabilities of a single institution. The name of the game from now on is Partner or Perish.

We can see the shape of the future already. The trend is to pool resources across universities to accomplish common goals for study abroad and exchanges. Oregon might serve as an example in this regard. We have every type of program model, from a short-term program in a particular academic department, to a college based program, to a university-wide program, to a system-wide program, to a regional consortial program, to a national consortial program and finally, to an international consortial program. It is only by pooling resources that we can respond to our students needs and interests. There is no way any one university in Oregon could afford to duplicate what is possible through inter-institu-

tional cooperation. The Oregon example is no longer atypical.

U.S. universities seem particularly poorly placed to be leaders in this Partner or Perish world of the future. We relish competition at every level, we cherish our institutional independence and will go to some length to avoid collaboration, even when it might be of obvious self-interest. Despite these traditions, this is another unusual characteristic of study abroad in the U.S. We are running ahead of our colleagues in recognizing the necessity of cooperation and the advantages of pooling resources. This is especially true of state-wide networks. California, New York, Texas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Georgia, North Carolina and Oregon are in various stages of evolution but they all share the same basic goals. We are:

- Becoming more cost-effective through cooperation
- Pooling students who share common interests
- Diversifying opportunities through merging or sharing programs
- Sharing administrative costs
- Increasing program quality
- Reducing program proliferation and duplication
- Facilitating cooperation and communication with partner universities abroad
- Enhancing ability to attract external funding.

A new trend in regard to inter-institutional cooperation is public-private partnerships. This might be called another new reality. The pressure on resources at the campus level is such that “outsourcing” has become a common term to refer to various types of linkages with providers of programs and services from the private sector to the campus. Here in the Northwest, several public universities have contracted for years with AHA International, a private, not for profit organization, to provide on site administration, financial management and logistical support for a network of study abroad programs.

Another form of public-private partnership involves breaking down the traditional barriers between private and public universities. These universities share most of the same goals and the same challenges related to study abroad and exchanges but they have

seldom collaborated. This is changing too as common interests become more evident and public and private universities become more alike than different. In Oregon, the public university system has formal agreements with four private colleges to enroll the private college students in the network of international programs established by the state system. Once the old stereotypes are overcome and personal relationships developed, it is quite easy to work with neighbors, rather they be public or private.

Cooperation beyond the local campus involves changing some traditional behavior. It seems strange to say, but it involves cross-cultural understanding. Our universities are famous for their diversity. What works on one campus is not necessarily going to work for a partner. Partners need to get to know one another so they can understand their cultural differences and adjust to them. Good communication is the key among partners. There is no substitute for visiting partners and getting acquainted with the local culture and colleagues who work within that environment. Cooperation and compromise go together in the process of forming good working relationships among diverse partner universities.

Another new reality in the Partner or Perish world is technology. New technologies have made it possible to think of new ways of cooperating. Traditional barriers related to space and distance are disappearing. A student can receive information, be advised and apply online. The combination of applying new technologies and working closely through a consortial framework has many advantages. The personal contact at the key points in the process, such as interviews and orientation, can be maintained while more bureaucratic matters are handled through electronic networks. All kinds of creative ideas for new program models are emerging as new technologies become more affordable and more sophisticated. Technology can create a sense of close collaboration over long distances in a way that was not possible a few years ago. Technology also serves to blur the traditional lines separating public and private institutions and, in the process, makes cooperation with off-campus partners of all kinds more realistic. We should remember, however, that it is not the solution to all aspects of study abroad and exchange program coordination, and it will never be a substitute for actually living and studying within a new cultural environment.

Conclusion

International education professionals often lead the way in the Partner or Perish world. That seems appropriate as our careers are chosen because we

value understanding others and adjusting to different ways of thinking and acting. Those same values are what make a good partnership among universities work effectively. If you have not entered the Partner or Perish world, you should recognize that it is the future of study abroad and exchanges and you are well positioned to contribute to it.