

Applying Standards to Creative Programming in Education Abroad

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Programs for American undergraduate students abroad reflect the range of choices available to program sponsors in location, community partners, curriculum, housing, facilities, staff support, term length, and admission requirements. Quality standards for programs abroad allow for these differences, provided in each case that the program format adheres to its goals for student learning and development. In this respect, standards for quality in education abroad follow the same principle as those for all institutions of higher education in the United States: strict adherence to the institution's mission and flexibility in planning how to achieve that stated mission.

The Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) is a nonprofit program provider that is organized as a consortium of nearly 175 U.S. colleges and universities whose representatives direct its academic governance policy and procedures. Founded in 1950, it operates ninety programs at thirty-two locations in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and South America. In 2008-09, IES enrolled more than five thousand students in fall, spring, summer, full-year, and short-term programs.

IES Abroad offers an example of an international education system that applies principle to practice, adhering to two sets of standards in operating its programs of education abroad, the IES Model Assessment Program (MAP) and the Forum on Education Abroad Standards of Good Practice. Both sets of standards are explicit in describing the framework for planning and operating a program abroad and the types of policies and procedures that are required to support the framework. IES Abroad administrative and teaching staff collaborate to interpret the standards in the context of the locale and to create a total learning experience to support goals for student learning and cultural adaptation. Two examples are presented here of

the creative application of the standards to the planning of intentionally designed, fully integrated educational environments: internships and community-based learning in Rome and field study in Beijing.

COMPREHENSIVE STANDARDS APPLY TO A VARIETY OF PROGRAMS

The IES MAP standards emerged from discussions across IES with international administrative and teaching staff and members of the consortium about what constitutes academic quality in education abroad, specifically in terms of programming for students' intellectual and intercultural growth. The document focuses on three categories: (1) the student learning environment, including coursework, internships, and field study; (2) resources for student learning, including administrative and teaching-staff qualifications, student qualifications, facilities, housing, health, and safety and risk management; and (3) the field of assessment of student learning and development abroad. These categories serve as a framework for the design, development, and evaluation of programs abroad. The IES MAP is undergoing its fifth revision—evidence of expanding goals for student learning and development abroad, the dynamic nature of educational opportunities, and the changing academic and sociocultural needs and interests of the American undergraduate population.

The IES MAP served as the starting point for the Standards of Good Practice, first drafted in 2004 by the Forum on Education Abroad. The forum undertook the project of writing clear and comprehensive standards for the field shortly after its creation to provide a means to assess program quality in light of the growing number of student enrollments abroad and of program types. The forum was awarded the status of Standards Development Organization by the federal government, conferring legitimacy to the Standards of Good

Practice for a variety of program types. The Standards of Good Practice address the same categories as the IES MAP standards and also articulate standards that apply to the field at large. As guidelines for program evaluation, both documents follow the premise that a program should be evaluated according to its own mission and goals. The IES MAP formulates this idea in the phrase “standards, not standardization” in program quality (IES Abroad 2008a).

DEFINING HOLISTIC GOALS FOR STUDENTS

The IES MAP articulates common goals for students that are the basis for program-specific goals in the categories of intellectual development, the development of language skills in language-immersion programs, and the development of intercultural competencies in the context of personal growth. IES Abroad undertook a three-year project beginning in 2006 to explore the intersections between courses, cocurricular activities, and community engagement as complementary means to achieve these program goals. It held workshops at a number of program sites for administrative and teaching staff to collaborate in setting goals for students and expanding learning opportunities based on those goals. The IES 3-D Program Model evolved from these workshops, with 3-D representing the three dimensions of holistic learning and development—cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Gillespie, Braskamp, and Dwyer 2009).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ROME

Two curricular options at IES Abroad Rome—internships and community-based learning—are designed to meet academic goals for Italian language fluency, knowledge of different communities within the city, and understanding of Italian culture. Octavio di Leo, director of IES Rome, says, “These two elements are fundamental, integral parts of the program as a language

immersion program.” Since previous work in Italian is not a prerequisite for admission to the program, internships and community-based learning give students an entry point to a segment of Italian society regardless of their language level.

Goals for student development are imbedded in the planning and implementation of the internships and community-based learning through the work of two full-time staff members who also teach the companion seminars. One of the most



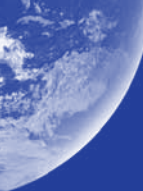
difficult—and most important—lessons to learn in working across cultures is that of culturally based values. By observing and listening, students not only become aware of values in their host community but also begin to assess their own culturally based values and attitudes.

IES Abroad identifies the goal of internships and community-based learning as fostering students’ significant intellectual and personal development by providing them with structured experiences at a work site that complement and enhance classroom learning. The mission statement for experiential learning at IES Abroad specifies that “the academic component provides students

with cultural, political, and socio-economic insights that further their understanding of the host environment and host culture” (IES 2003). These goals emerge from the standards in the IES MAP that apply to internships: “Internships make effective use of location and local resources ... help develop intercultural, cognitive, and interpersonal skills ... [and] require students to synthesize the practical and theoretical aspects of their work site.” (IES 2008a).

Internships in Rome require students to work at a placement site one to two days a week and take a companion academic seminar on the Italian education system, labor system, and organizational culture. Substantive work assignments paired with a high level of interaction between students and full-time employees distinguish the program, which enrolls an average of 25 percent of the student population every term, a significant representation.

The community-based learning program, the only one of its kind in Rome for American undergraduates, partners with a Jesuit refugee center, and with la Comunità di Sant’ Egidio, a lay Catholic association that was established in 1968 to assist poor and marginalized populations in the city and that also engages in international conflict mediation. These partnerships follow current thinking at IES Abroad that IES Centers should identify a segment or segments of the local community to which it can make an organizational commitment and which in turn will contribute to the program concept of a total learning environment. The companion seminar uses the methodology of participant observation to teach students basic skills such as conducting interviews and taking field notes and prepares them for their work and their major assignment—a field journal. Course content examines the major social issues challenging practitioners in a diverse range of fields, including community development, public health, and conflict management. Students complete a project on behalf



of the organization, working with administrative staff and the target population.

MOBILE LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN BEIJING

The management philosophy of IES Abroad Beijing is the team approach that bridges administration and academics. This concept translates into the practice of placing staff members who are qualified to teach in the classroom and, conversely, training instructors for a role often restricted to staff—that of field trip leaders. The program is housed at Beijing Foreign Language University (BeiWai), an elite language-training university, and offers two tracks: a rigorous Language Intensive Program that was the original curriculum, and a new broad curriculum, the Contemporary Issues Program. Conceptually, both curricula aim to immerse students in the host environment through language learning and field study.

Language Intensive Program students must meet the prerequisite of having studied Chinese for the equivalent of two college semesters. Mandarin Chinese, offered in the program at multiple intermediate and advanced levels, constitutes two-thirds of the semester course load for most students. At the higher language levels, courses expand beyond conversation to the learning activities of reading, writing, and listening. The Language Intensive Program requires students to take a language pledge that they will use Chinese in designated areas and at designated times.

The following model for “mobile classroom learning” serves both a ten-day trip and shorter trips. A preparatory information session includes a discussion in English with experts on the geography, society, and culture of the destination and in Chinese with the director on basic travel tips. Students are introduced to special vocabulary of the region and provided with a glossary sheet that they are expected to use as a reference when they talk to their hosts during the trip.

Student experiences on field trips are fully integrated into course assignments. Itineraries include formal and informal meetings with local people at which students engage them with questions and in conversation. In the Language Intensive Program, students might be required to keep a trip journal on specific topics or make a class presentation, depending on their written and oral skills. Students in the Language Intensive Program are led by their language teachers, who continue classes in context and hold students to their language pledge. One of the field study destinations, Yunnan River Province in the southwest, is specifically chosen to introduce students to people and their history in a rural region and to increase students’ awareness of the ethnic diversity of China. The student body is divided into small cohorts of fifteen to eighteen students to maximize their learning and minimize their impact on their destinations. The groups follow reverse itineraries that include a Tibetan village, where they stay with families, enter into family and community life, and learn about education, livelihoods, the local environment, and customs in the village. The itinerary also takes students through Yunnan’s mountains, where they are led on a four-day hike by a local guide who introduces them to the Mosuo people, one of the world’s few surviving matriarchal societies.

The Contemporary Issues Program, organized in three modules during a fourteen-week term, dedicates one module to a topic that includes the ten-day field study. An economics course and a course on ethnicity in contemporary China share the objective of deepening students’ understanding of what it means to be “Chinese” by offering them firsthand experiences with the multiple populations, communities, and ways of life in their host country. Research assignments in Contemporary Issues courses are linked to the field study, and a number of students also pursue independent research projects in connection with the itinerary.

Students in both the Language Intensive Program and Contemporary Issues Program contribute to a newsletter with articles in English and Chinese about their experiences. These articles focus on the Chinese families who hosted the students and individuals who met with them; these profiles are not assigned topics, but they clearly represent the significant impact of the one-to-one interactions that occur on the trips. The many issues in modern China’s economic life—power, water resources, population displacement, economic development, and entrepreneurship—converge in this account and give a new personal dimension to course topics. Many other examples might illustrate how standards provide the framework that is filled out by administrators and faculty. Whatever example might be chosen, it must acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between the on-site administrative and teaching staff and students. Just as gifted administrators and faculty inspire students, so do curious and engaged students inspire the life of an academic program abroad. ■

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