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Field Study Opportunities A Unique Learning Experience

Mark E. Headings

Introduction

Creative instruction involves seeking, discovering, and implementing effective new approaches to learning. This can include innovative and experiential alternatives or supplements to conventional classroom instruction. The acquisition of knowledge should be a positive and enjoyable experience for the student in order to maximize the knowledge gained and its retention. Students differ in how they learn best; however, for some it is through experiences and applied activities in contrast to primarily theoretical instruction. The approach used at The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute combines theoretical instruction and applied activities ("hands on" experiences). The latter are obtained through course laboratory activities, practicums, internships, independent and group studies, and more recently through international field study (or study tour) opportunities. Study tours to Ecuador, Spain, and Andros Island, Bahamas, are offered as college credit courses and give students the option to participate on either a credit or noncredit basis.

Planning a Field Study

Preparation for a successful field study (especially in a foreign country) requires a considerable amount of time, hard work, and advance planning. Many details need to be dealt with before embarking on such an undertaking. A person considering the leadership role for a field study group should first identify the desired topic of investigation within his/her area of expertise. One then needs to check possible locations for conducting such a study as well as the potential arrangements for food, lodging, and transportation for a group. Other questions which need to be answered are: (1) where does one obtain permission to conduct the proposed study at a selected location and what are the regulations (i.e., is a permit required), (2) what are the types and quantity of equipment and supplies necessary for such a study, (3) what time of the year is best to conduct the field study, and what time fits the schedules of the prospective participants, (4) is there sufficient student interest in your selected topic area and in the location selected that they will want to participate, (5) can the students afford the cost of transportation, food, and lodging, and (6) will the college you represent provide course credit for those participants who desire it?

The leader should travel to the selected study site before taking a group of students there. This allows

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him/her to verify that the study is feasible and to intelligently prepare a study plan of daily activities in advance. The leader is thereby able to become familiar with the possibilities and limitations of such a study, the unique characteristics of the location and culture, the availability of transportation and accommodations, and the types of equipment and supplies most useful for the study under existing conditions. It is recommended that photographs (slides and color prints) be taken of the study location and surrounding areas, including recreational opportunities. These will be useful as excellent promotional materials to stimulate the interest of prospective participants and will help build enthusiasm for the project. One way to use color photographs to promote the project is to attach the prints to posters (along with a script describing them) and then place such posters at key locations in your school.

Begin collecting names and addresses of prospective participants long before the scheduled date for the study tour to begin. Encourage those who express some interest to give you their names and addresses. This then allows you to follow up with mailings to them concerning the progress made in the planning stages and to provide details and publication references on other points of interest such as those dealing with the geography and history of the area and culture of the people living there. Other pre-trip details include collecting student registrations and fees for the study tour. Once the participants have been identified, more specific details need to be given them regarding personal effects to take along, whether a passport or birth certificate will be needed to enter a foreign country, the matter of adequate insurance coverage, and the departure time and place. You may choose to include a liability statement on the student application and reservation form for the protection of both the tour leader and the school. This form is to be signed by the student. Following is an example of such a statement:

"Dr. Mark E. Headings, as Tour Leader, will make every normal effort to provide for a safe, comfortable, enjoyable tour. However, Dr. Mark E. Headings and The Ohio State University, including the Agricultural Technical Institute, assume no responsibility for loss, damage, or injury to person, property or otherwise resulting directly or indirectly, from acts of God, dangers incident to the sea, breakdown of machinery or equipment, fire, civil disturbances, strikes, riots, thefts, pilferage, epidemics, quarantines, custom regulations, delays or cancellations of, or changes in, itinerary or schedules; or from acts or omissions of any nature; or from any cause or causes beyond the control of Tour Leader; and the Tour Leader shall not be liable or responsible for any additional expense or liability sustained or incurred by the purchases and/or passenger as a result of any of the foregoing occurrences or conditions."

If you are fortunate enough to establish a working relationship with a non-profit organization that specializes in facilitating such field studies and you choose to utilize their services, many of the planning details are readily resolved.

Facilitating Organization

An organization known as International Field Studies, Inc., with headquarters in Columbus, Ohio, was formed in 1970. It is a nonprofit organization designed to provide educational opportunities for interested parties who wish to conduct field studies in the continental United States or on Andros Island in the Bahamas.¹ Due to its status as a nonprofit organization and its mode of operation, it is able to serve as a facilitator for field study groups at a very economical cost to the student. As an example, some details of the IFS operation on Andros Island will be described. IFS owns and operates the Forfar Field Station located on the northeast coast of Andros Island. The facility consists of a lodge (containing a dining room, lounge area, classroom, and library), cabins for overnight lodging and a maintenance and electric power building. Transportation is provided from Ohio to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, via IFS buses or vans. A 40-passenger twin engine Convair 340 airplane owned and operated by IFS is used to transport field study groups from Fort Lauderdale to Andros Island. A large flat bed truck with side racks is used to transport the group around the Island during their stay. The length of time a group spends on the Island is normally about one week.

Geography of Study Area

The Commonwealth of the Bahamas with some 700 islands and 2000 islets became an independent nation in 1973.² Andros Island is the largest island in the Bahamas, consisting of an area of approximately 115 miles long and 40 miles wide. It is located 34 miles southwest of Nassau and about 136 miles east of Miami, Florida. Much of the Island is unpopulated with only about 8800 people living mostly in villages along the east coast of the Island. The interior is extensively forested by regrowth Caribbean (Bahamian) pine. This subtropical island contains five distinct vegetation zones thus offering a variety of habitats.¹ The east coast has some beautiful beaches and an extensive coral reef with an amazing diversity of marine life. Other interesting phenomena on the Island include the Blue Holes. These consist of deep holes filled with water, some of which have fresh water floating on top of salt water.³ Temperatures on the Island average around 70°F in winter and 81°F in summer.

Field Study Activities

Many student groups who use the Forfar Field Station study marine biology since it is an ideal setting for this type of activity. Pontoon boats and scuba gear are available at the station to facilitate such studies. Other groups study the diverse plant flora of this subtropical island. A student group from The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute studied the insect fauna on the Island in December of 1982. If a group or individual wishes to collect biological specimens, a collecting permit is required in advance from the Baha-

mian government. An excellent educational experience is to visit the Bahamian Agricultural Experiment Station on the Island where experimentation is done on a diversity of crops and livestock.

The Bahamas is a foreign nation not far off the shores of the United States. Consequently, field study group participants have the opportunity for exposure to a foreign culture which is probably quite different from their own. The field study experience provides students the opportunity to engage in serious scientific study while also having time to enjoy the environment and participate in recreational activities such as swimming, snorkeling, and hiking. Due to favorable climatic conditions on the Island, any time of the year is suitable for conducting field studies of one type or another. However, depending upon the type of study activity, certain months of the year may be preferable.

Daily Activities

The group leader is responsible for developing and arranging daily group activities. Depending upon the size of the group, an assistant group leader may be very helpful. As an example, a daily routine will be described for a group of students who studied insect fauna on Andros Island.

Following breakfast each day, the group met in the classroom at the Forfar Field Station for a lecture session on the subject of study including the study activity plan for the day. Handouts and references for reading assignments were also distributed. The group then loaded the equipment and supplies needed for the day and were transported to the study site. When traveling to an inland site, transportation was provided either by truck or by boat on one of the many rivers. Boats were also used to visit sites on islets offshore. This enabled the group to collect hundreds of insect specimens from a variety of habitats. In this illustration, different study sites were used each day. Around one o'clock each day, the group returned to the field station for lunch. This was followed with some free time for recreational activities such as swimming, snorkeling, and hiking. During this time, some members of the group worked on preserving and mounting specimens collected; however, most of this was done following the evening meal. After the specimens collected that day were taken care of, a seminar was given on some aspect of the Island's history or plant and animal life or on life in the sea. Staff members at the Forfar Field Station are excellent resource persons for seminars of this type. On occasion, there was also the opportunity to experience some of the culture of the people living on the Island by visiting villages and attending social functions. Some days would end late at night beside a campfire on the beach.

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Experience Evaluation

Participants should be asked to evaluate their experiences when the entire field study project is completed. The evaluation will identify the strengths and weaknesses of the project from the participants' perspective. The response from the entomology study group was very positive. Comments were made to the effect that it was a very valuable experience and that they would recommend it to others. Negative comments pertained to the crowded conditions in the van from Wooster, Ohio, to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and the cold showers in the cabins at the Forfar Field Station. Many of the group recorded their experiences on film (slides and color prints). After returning to school, members desiring college credit for the field study were asked to write a paper on their experiences. Much of the knowledge gained from these experiences will last a lifetime. The group wants to meet again in the near future to share their experiences and their slides and other photographs. Some of the group members have indicated they want to participate a second time if an Entomology Study Tour to Andros Island is offered again this year.

Conclusion

Field study opportunities such as the illustration described on Andros Island in the Bahamas offer a unique learning experience for students seeking "hands on" experiences. Participation in such activities enhance the retention of knowledge gained, and the experience itself is one that will be cherished for a lifetime. The planning aspect of a field study is very important and requires a great amount of hard work and attention to detail. Being able to utilize the services of a facilitating organization such as International Field Studies, Inc., makes the task of the leader much easier and the cost to the participant more reasonable. The leader who does his/her homework well will find the experience extremely satisfying.

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