

Globalizing Education: A Model for Study Abroad Programs for Landscape Design Students



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Abstract

A study abroad program in Italy for landscape design majors at South Dakota State University (SDSU) was successfully conducted in the summer of 2002. A three-week two-credit course was developed as a part of a larger university-wide program to promote globalization of the curricula. With the support of the university's President, a faculty member traveled to Italy on a planning trip in 2001. The purpose of the trip was multi-faceted information gathering for the establishment of the program. Nine students from the Horticulture, Forestry, Landscape, and Parks Department (HFLP) participated in the study abroad program. Results and comments from a post-course survey were positive, indicating that students were very satisfied with the program. This paper presents the experience of a successful international landscape design course providing prospective programs with a model for the establishment and implementation of similar courses.

Introduction

Friedman (1999) states that globalization is not a passing phenomenon, but rather the definitive world system. Thus, the United States needs its higher education sector to graduate individuals who can understand the global environment. Such a statement expresses not only the importance, but also the challenges of globalization in a world where understanding the international dimension of our lives is vital. One of the challenges facing higher education institutions is how to make its constituents aware of global interdependence and to prepare future citizens to function effectively in a global environment (NASULGC Strategic Vision Committee, 2000). In response to the challenge, expanding globalization of curricula becomes an integral part of the mission and strategic planning of land-grant higher education institutions. South Dakota State University, among other land-grant universities, strives to incorporate various forms of international components into its curricula. However weaving topics, sections, or a few lectures of internationally-related issues into curricula is not sufficient to provide students with understanding, compassion, and empathy for

different global cultures (Crunkilton et al., 2003).

One of the most effective strategies is study abroad programs where students travel and study overseas for a period of time. With adequate academic and cultural orientation in the United States, study abroad programs can be influential in presenting students with life-changing opportunity. It is the intent of the author that presenting this example of a successful study abroad program as a model will provide guidance to other programs and institutions interested in establishing or expanding their overseas educational opportunities for their students and future citizens.

Methods

In an attempt to implement South Dakota State University's goals for promoting international awareness and education, the Horticulture, Forestry, Landscape and Parks Department established a study abroad program for Landscape Design majors. One faculty member was given the responsibility to plan, design, and conduct the program. The following points, though not intended to be exhaustive, outline the basic steps for establishing and implementing such a program.

Identifying University Infrastructure

The implementation of a new international education curriculum requires various types of support from the higher education institution. Thus, to ensure support at the university and college levels, the goals and objectives of the landscape design study abroad program were designed to fall within the institution's mission statement and strategic planning framework. This was critical since the success of the study abroad program was dependent upon assistance provided by the institution's financial, administrative and human resources, and the feasibility of coordinating their work.

Identifying Program Leader

Acker and Taylor (2000) stated that the international experience of faculty members was central to providing students with a globalized learning environment and experience. Language and previously established academic and cultural knowledge of

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the destination country were preferred criteria for selecting the faculty member serving as program leader. This was to help ensure the faculty member's ability to respond and deal with diversity of situations as they might arise during the program.

Identifying Country or Region of Study

Italy was selected as the country of study because of its relevance to the history of landscape architecture. Italy offers a myriad of major landscape architectural and architectural works, such as gardens, villas, parks, and urban spaces, especially those dating back to the Roman, Renaissance, and Baroque periods. The decision to focus the program on one country was based on a number of reasons. First, the rich history of landscapes and gardens in Italy provided a significant number of study sites. Second, limiting travel to one country allowed students unhurried time to adjust, observe, absorb, and appreciate the local culture. Third, time, money, and stress spent on traveling from one country to another were eliminated.

Planning the Study Abroad Program

Working closely with the office of international programs and with academic and financial support from the university's president, a planning trip was undertaken in the summer of 2001. The purpose of the trip was to gather information related to sites to be visited, including details such as locations, fees, and accessibility. Special arrangements needed to be made for some sites which were isolated, privately owned, or required official permission from the Italian Ministry of Culture. This step proved extremely valuable. It furnished the program leader with vital knowledge and minimized occurrence of unexpected situations. It provided a realistic understanding of the setting which was helpful during planning and scheduling the program. During the academic year 2001-2002, information gathered was used to establish the study abroad program.

The program was developed as a three-week two-credit course. The program length was based on the number of sites and cities involved in the program schedule. Three weeks was found to be most favorable duration, as it allowed students time for cultural adjustment and transition into the Italian culture. To formally integrate the study abroad course within the Landscape Design curriculum, the course emphasized information and sites discussed in the pre-requisite History of Landscape Architecture course.

Another consideration was the cost of the course. Costs included tuition, fees, airfare, and overseas accommodations, transportation, and sites' admission fees. Since no financial aid sources were identified to subsidize the students' costs, students were responsible for covering the total cost resulting in a

number of implications. First, the lack of financial support limited the number of students applying for the course. Second, keeping the overall cost of the course affordable limited the number, type, and nature of the course activities. However, some students were able to fund their expenses through soliciting donations from friends and relatives. Others applied for additional student loans through the university's financial aid office.

Student Recruitment and Retention

Parallel to curriculum development, advertising the study abroad program started in early fall of 2001. The course was announced by faculty members in their respective classes. Illustrated flyers with course description, outline, schedule, and requirements were posted in the department. A number of slide presentations were conducted by the program leader open to all majors and followed by question and answer sessions. The announcement efforts generated considerable interest among majors. Since the maximum number of students for the course was ten, selection was based on an application process including a statement of intent and other pre-established criteria. These criteria specified the course History of Landscape Architecture as a pre-requisite, a minimum GPA of 3.0, and, preferably, knowledge of a second language. A departmental committee reviewed applications. Selected students were provided with an information packet including instructions for course registration, application for a passport, and payment schedule and method.

Academic and Cultural Orientation

To best prepare students for the overseas experience, a non-credit academic and cultural orientation, meeting one hour per week, was scheduled for the spring semester of 2002. Academic orientation focused on familiarizing students with sites on the course schedule. In addition to information provided by the program leader, each student researched a site, presented the information, and prepared a one page handout for class members. This proved to be a valuable orientation activity since it not only provided in-depth information, but also sustained students' interest and heightened their anticipation and expectation of the experience.

In addition, students were clearly informed of course requirements. Overseas, students were required to keep a journal and sketch book. Literary descriptions and observations of sites supplemented with visual illustrations were the basis of the course grade. To demonstrate the breadth of their overseas experience and how much they benefited from it, students were expected, upon return, to collectively put together a presentation for the department, university, and community members of SDSU.

Cultural orientation focused on introducing students to American and Italian cultural similarities and differences. Students were informed of what to expect in Italy regarding restaurants, banks, monetary transactions, transportation, and relevant issues of legality. Prior to departure, students were required to provide emergency contact information, obtain health insurance that was valid overseas, and acquire international student identification cards.

Course Evaluation

To evaluate the course as an educational tool and to measure how much students benefited from it, students who completed the course were asked to fill out a survey. Questions focused on students' perception of different parts of the experience: the preparation before the course, the impact of the course on their life and academic future career, and their satisfaction levels. Students were asked to rank the following:

1. Importance of pre-requisite course
2. Importance of academic and cultural orientation
3. Impact of program on students' future academic career
4. Impact of program on students' personal growth
5. Impact of program on students' global understanding and awareness
6. Students' overall satisfaction with the overseas experience
7. Students' support for integrating overseas programs in Landscape Design curriculum
8. Students' recommendation of overseas programs to other students

Points (1) and (2) were based on a 4.0 scale ranging from very important=4, important=3, somewhat important=2, to not important=1. Points (3) through (5) were based on 5.0 scale ranging from very positive impact=5, positive impact=4, no impact=3, negative impact=2, to very negative impact=1. Point (6) was on a 5.0 scale ranging from very satisfied=5, satisfied=4, neither satisfied nor unsatisfied=3, unsatisfied=2, to very unsatisfied=1. And points (7) and (8) were on a 5.0 scale ranging from excellent=5, very good=4, good=3, fair=2, to poor=1.

In addition, students were asked to provide their thoughts, comments, and feedback on the following:

1. List of most positive experiences with the program
2. List of most negative/difficult/disappointing experiences with the program
3. Additional comments students would like to share

Results and Discussion

Data presented here are compiled from surveys completed by students who participated in the course. All students indicated that having the History of Landscape Architecture course as a pre-requisite was very important. All students reported that academic and cultural orientation was very important. More than half the students indicated a very positive impact of the course on their future academic life (4.6 on a 5.0 scale), while all of them reported a very positive impact on both personal growth and global understanding and awareness. In addition, all students were overall very satisfied with participation in the overseas experience. Students' support for integrating an overseas program in the Landscape Design curriculum was 4.6 on a 5.0 scale, and their recommendation of overseas programs to other students was 4.8 on a 5.0 scale.

Students' comments to the open-ended questions were very valuable as they summed up their thoughts about the experience. "Visiting landscapes that we studied in history," "exposure to Italian culture," "being submersed in Italian daily living" and "meeting people from different cultures" were most frequent on students' list of positive experiences. Most students indicated that the overseas course was such a great experience that they did not have many disappointments. One student wrote "it was a wonderful time and coming up with negatives is difficult." However, a few students mentioned that traveling on trains was "hard but proved to be a valuable learning experience." Some students indicated that the language barrier was difficult in the beginning, but "they were able to manage." A few students pointed out that traveling as a group "was stressful but fun."

In retrospect, with one faculty member as a program leader responsible for the diversity of situations overseas, the group size being nine students was considered ideal. One student observed that "the size of the group was perfect," and that she "would definitely not recommend more than ten!" However, collaboration between more than one faculty members in conducting such a program also would have its benefits. It would allow for a larger number of students, and better control and management of the group. In addition, deciding on three week duration for the course provided an unhurried educational experience which was highly appreciated by the students, especially those who had not traveled before. One student who had prior traveling experience commented that the program length was good. She wrote "..... When I was in Venice before I did not appreciate how the city worked because my trip was very short. Spending more time in Venice, I learned to appreciate the unique character of the buildings and how people brought the landscape close to them in

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such a limited space.” Finally, general comments from the students were more descriptive of their views. One student wrote “three weeks of my life I will never forget,” “it made a huge impact on my worldview,” and “this experience was the best thing I’ve ever done in my life! I can only hope for bigger and better things in my future.”

Summary

With the change towards a more global environment, many land-grant institutions reoriented their mission and strategic planning to incorporate goals and objectives that contribute to increasing the degree of globalization of the curricula. In response, South Dakota State University strived to establish multiple study abroad programs. One of these programs was planned and designed for Landscape Design majors in the Horticulture, Forestry, Landscape, and Parks Department. The course was concluded successfully in the summer of 2002. Results and comments from a post-course survey indicated that students were very satisfied and perceived the experience to have had a very positive impact on their future academic endeavors, personal growth, and global understanding and awareness.

Their experience also generated interest among other Landscape Design majors, other programs at SDSU, and university and community members. While not the only avenue for introducing globalization into curricula, the study abroad approach is considered one of the more effective strategies in preparing our students and future citizens to interact effectively in an increasingly global environment.

Literature Cited

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