

Ten Important Considerations for Short-Term Study Abroad Programs

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As we walked through the rice paddies waiting for the sun to rise over Mount Agung, women made morning offerings; men began to work in the fields, and children in crisp uniforms walked to school. This was the first morning in Bali, Indonesia for students enrolled in the Community Development course at the University of Guam. In her final paper at the conclusion of the course, one senior student wrote, "This course has expanded my worldview in so many profound ways. It exposed me first hand to a different country, culture, and tradition. I experienced the different sights, smells, tastes, and emotions that I know couldn't have been possible through a textbook. I am going to graduate next month with an experience that has fundamentally changed my life." In this article we would like to share ten important considerations for university faculty planning short-term academic programs abroad.

The two courses that take us to Bali include "Community Development" and the "Bali Field Workshop". As with every senior-level course on campus, we spend many hours in class analyzing, discussing and debating theories, models and case studies. Students are required to make in-class presentations on a variety of relevant readings from both the classic and contemporary literature. Several weeks are dedicated to familiarizing students with Indonesia and Bali, within the context of culture, development and social change. Finally, toward the latter half of the semester, our team travels to Bali for seven to ten days of intensive academic activities, ranging from on-site lectures to field observations, as well as service learning and site visits to remote villages. The goal is for the students to learn first-hand what development means on the ground; i.e., for real people who struggle to make ends meet in their everyday lives.

We present here some important considerations for faculty engaging in short-term study abroad courses. First, we have learned that the preparations must be considerable prior to traveling to another country, especially if that country is very different from one's own. A fairly well-grounded appreciation of the history of the country and current issues are essential in order for students to be able to ask informed questions and make salient observations. Prior to traveling, sufficient time must be spent in class to allow students to digest the information and discuss questions. Along with academic preparations, students must begin to understand the cultural climate and context within which they are being placed. Some of this involves fairly straightforward instructions, such as, 'it is not acceptable to touch people on the top of their heads [in Indonesia] since this is regarded as the most sacred part of the human body.' Some of the preparation time involves more complex matters, such as nuances of social relations and family dynamics within the country.

A second issue to consider is for students to acquire a very basic linguistic competence of the local language of the country to be visited. We recognize that we are not teaching a language course, yet, when our students can address a local resident in Bali using very basic sentences in Bahasa Indonesia or in Balinese, the initial connection between the two people is greatly enhanced, as well as the student's sense of belonging. It is of considerable value if a visiting student can greet a local resident, and ask, "How are you?" Likewise, if the student can identify his or her country of origin, explain why he/she is visiting the country, indicate a minimum knowledge of the local language, and apologize for the latter, a significant connection between the visiting student and the local resident may well be under way.

A third consideration relates to culture shock. Prior to leaving for the field, we have learned that it is helpful to engage students in a discussion about culture shock. Many students have never experienced culture shock before, and therefore, to speak with them about the stages of culture shock and to prepare them for what they are about to encounter will help them adjust to life away from home. When students are feeling out of their comfort zone, they can reassure each other about this particular stage of culture shock, and help each other accept that their discomfort is normal and natural. Students are then able to begin to embrace and enjoy the very different setting that the overseas destination has to offer. Team discussions at the end of each day allow students to voice their concerns and their struggles and support others who are experiencing the same.

A fourth consideration to be carefully studied and applied is team building. We have learned that spending enough time prior to travel on team building exercises can significantly contribute to a positive experience for everyone during the overseas component of the course. Students join the course from different backgrounds and life experiences. Team building exercises afford them the opportunity to find common ground, to become friends and

build respect for each other. We take time in class to engage in exercises that contribute to solidifying these bonds. These include highlighting positive virtues of team members, trust exercises, weekend hiking trips, untying 'human knots' outside on the lawn, and a number of other activities that all contribute to forging friendships. Team-building exercises such as these occur before we travel and within the host country, to help create a positive sense of teamwork.

A fifth consideration concerns research permits. Scholars must not assume that they can travel anywhere in the world and conduct field research without official permission. In Indonesia, for example, the National or Regional Government must issue a Research Permit. Indeed, in today's world it can be a time-consuming, laborious and costly endeavor for a foreign [outside] researcher to be granted a Research Permit in most countries. Accordingly, students may undertake systematic observations, listen, and learn a great deal from the host community, which is an enormously valuable educational experience, but not engage in research without permission. We help our students to understand why our team is not conducting research, *per se*, during our short visit to Bali. This is a lesson for all academics including graduate students studying abroad. Stories abound of academics falling into serious trouble in many parts of the world for not having official permits.

A sixth consideration relates to daily schedules. While overseas in the host country, we feel it important to have in hand a schedule of daily activities, and stick to the schedule as closely as possible. Students tend to experience less anxiety if they (and their families and friends at home) can view an outline of expected events that will occur during the entire stay overseas. If appropriate, students might be called on to assist in creating the schedule, which enhances their sense of ownership of the activities. Surprises, delays, unexpected opportunities, and the like inevitably emerge during the field stay, but having a schedule to come back to is immensely helpful in keeping the course on track.

A seventh consideration that we find helpful is daily journaling. Students are required to bring a journal with them to Bali, and to write in it every day at certain appointed times, usually at the end of the day. Their daily entries must describe not only what happened, but also their personal responses and reflections. The requirement of journaling demands a time commitment for students and faculty alike—students must write and faculty must read. The faculty provide written feedback in the journals to each student on a daily basis. This system serves to reassure and to keep the lines of communication open and meaningful between faculty and students while in the field.

An eighth consideration relates to order and safety. It is essential to ensure the safety of students throughout their stay abroad. Students are given detailed instructions prior to leaving for Bali with regard to health and well-being. On-site, students are encouraged to venture out in groups. Having both male and female faculty on the project ensures that students always have someone to talk to about academic and personal matters. We maintain a curfew out of respect for the family we stay with and so each member of the team is well-rested for the following day.

A ninth consideration is to engage local scholars and academics. It is very important to make a concerted effort to meet and work with in-country scholars during a short-term stay overseas. If there is a local university, team members should make every effort to go and meet scholars in residence. In Bali, we greatly value the Balinese scholars in Anthropology, Economics, Primatology, and Tourism who are now our esteemed academic colleagues and greatly cherished friends at Udayana University in Denpasar. Our Balinese colleagues have graciously accepted our invitations to guest lecture to our team at our homestay, and their visits extend often to dinners and discussions late into the evening. According to one of our students: "The visiting professors really helped us see the global issues involved in what we are studying. One of the benefits of being at the University of Guam is that we are not limited to the points of view of the scholars from our institution. Our professors network with scholars in other countries and universities to give us a more holistic education. The Bali experience has really given us the opportunity to hear different perspectives." Engaging local scholars can be a transformative experience for students and faculty.

A tenth and final consideration that can greatly add to the success of short-term study abroad courses is preparing the students for reverse culture shock on their return home. The first time we taught a course such as this, we reasoned: "The students will only be in Bali for ten days; how intense can the experience be? The students will not experience any reverse culture shock". We were wrong. The ten days in Bali were so intense, so full of new experiences, and so out-of-the-ordinary, that, upon returning home, students had pronounced difficulties re-adjusting to their "old" lives. We have learned to counsel students to be especially sensitive to spouses/partners, close friends, and fellow classmates back on campus who may feel 'left out,' since the students have had such life-changing experiences while being away. A part of our students' reverse culture shock involves difficulty coping with relative economics and cost comparisons. Knowing first-hand what one American dollar can buy in Bali, and reflecting that a cup of coffee in Guam costs about the same as what a person earns doing hard physical labor in Bali for eight hours, can be difficult, to say the least. Students need to be encouraged to discuss these matters freely when back on

campus in the classroom. An important strategy that helps students readjust back home is a required lengthy reflection paper to be read aloud in class during the first class period after the return. Students are asked to share what happened to them in Bali and what it meant to them. Both laughter and tears are an inevitable part of these reflections. Shared understanding and empathy serves to reinforce the uniqueness of the shared endeavor.

Short-term study abroad courses for undergraduate students are of incredible value. Such endeavors often become powerful learning experiences and life-changing episodes. When the considerations that we have raised are taken into account, we believe that short-term study abroad courses can become especially meaningful as transformative and integrative experiences for undergraduate university students everywhere.