Preparing Faculty for a Global Experience

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Abstract - Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) has long embraced a project-based curriculum that now extends around the globe. WPI is committed to providing students and faculty with a safe and healthy experience off-campus making sure educators have the skills to help students succeed educationally as well as cope with safety, social, and behavioral issues. This paper will discuss our Global Perspective Program, philosophy with regard to risk management, health and safety issues in study abroad and describe a model for training as we equip faculty to handle unconventional roles beyond the classroom. Some of the areas addressed include advice and supports for helping students and faculty leaders acquire the cultural, communications, team-building and problem-solving abilities needed for a successful experience abroad.

Index Terms – Global education, Faculty development, Health and safety, Study abroad.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you are a faculty member responsible for an academic residential experience far from your home campus. What would you do in each of the situations described below?

- As the lone advisor at an off-campus site, you have arrived at your site several days ahead of the official start date to get settled before the students arrive. The site is a place you have never been before and you are less than fluent in the host language. The second morning you are there while listening to morning radio as you get ready for the day you think you hear a report of a major catastrophic event that is unfolding in the city where you are. You understand the words for “train station” and “bomb” but not much else. You turn on the TV immediately and are able to understand a bit more from the local station, and finally you are able to find the BBC station. It is clear now that there has been a major bombing in the largest train station in the city, hundreds may be dead and many, many more are injured. You know that there are students who were planning to arrive early in the host city. What do you do? Does what you do depend on whether or not you have family members with you?

- It has come to your attention that one student has been drinking excessively and may be doing drugs (cocaine). You have no proof of the latter. The other students claim that he is not participating in academic activities.

- Your colleague and co-advisor of the group, also a faculty member, violates the institution’s policy regarding a particular activity that is forbidden at a specific site. How should you react? What is your responsibility? What are the risks of non-action?

- While on site, you are informed, confidentially by another student that a local pub owner has accosted one of the female students where the students frequently go to socialize with the locals.

- While on site, one of the students approaches you with some very personal information. He tells you that his younger brother has “come out” the day before and that the brother has also been sexually assaulted by his boss. The student is wondering what to do since all of this has just occurred and he feels that he should be back in the U.S. to lend his support to his brother.

Each of these cases presents unique challenges for a faculty member responsible for students on an academic experience off-campus. How can anyone possibly be prepared to handle situations as diverse and complex as these? With a commitment to thoughtful training design faculty can be prepared to face most any circumstances while off-campus.

BACKGROUND

Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) has established residential programs in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, the South Pacific, and the US, providing opportunities for undergraduates to complete meaningful, academic off-campus experiences. WPI offers students the freedom to complete degree requirements away from campus in a professional experience under the direct supervision of WPI faculty, an experience that is unrivaled by traditional international study abroad. In 2003-2004, more than 69% of WPI's graduating class of 561 students completed one or both qualifying projects in teams off campus on externally sponsored topics. In the 2004-05 academic year WPI sent more than 500 students to one of our off-campus residential Project Centers as part of the Global Perspective Program.

WPI’s Global Perspective Program (GPP) was designed upon established learning principles that support learning by doing, challenging students with open-ended ambiguous problems, overcoming segmented thinking by working outside of the major discipline, and exposing learners to cultural, social, and intellectual diversity. It has its roots in a university-wide curriculum reform that began in 1970.

In 1970, a new curriculum replaced a traditional, course-based technical curriculum with a project-based program emphasizing teamwork, communication, and the integration of technical and societal concerns. WPI worked to structure a
curriculum that graduates socially conscious, globally literate engineers. Architects of the curriculum did it by breaking the barriers of traditional course boundaries and rigid curriculum requirements and placing students in contexts that provide learning opportunities consistent with our mission. Among the program degree requirements are three substantive projects: one in the humanities and arts, one in the student's major area of study, and one that explores the interrelationship between society and technology. WPI students are offered the opportunity to fulfill each of these degree requirements off campus through the Global Perspective Program (GPP).

The Interdisciplinary and Global Studies Division (IGSD) administers all program aspects of the GPP including student selection, advisor training, site and project development, risk management, re-entry programs, and overall academic quality. Typically 24 students travel to a site for a 2-month period to work full-time to complete the projects. Two faculty advisors accompany each group. A different WPI faculty member serves as project center director — responsible for setting up projects, handling general academic issues, and overseeing center operation. A local coordinator, who is a permanent resident at the site, assists the center director particularly with housing and logistical concerns. Student preparation for the experience includes formal coursework taught by WPI faculty, and orientation/cultural preparation taught by WPI professional staff. The same staff handles health and travel issues, risk management, and re-entry issues. [1, 2, 3, 4]

**WPI’s Approach to Risk Management**

While WPI has a unique model of study abroad, the institution is committed to providing students and faculty with a safe and healthy experience. As the numbers of students going off campus began to increase, it became obvious that the IGSD could not work in a vacuum to address risk management. It only took one perceived crisis in the making to bring the right players together to form the team that worries about the risk associated with sending students away to complete projects. The risk management team at WPI believes that effective risk management is a combination of two methodologies. The philosophical approach aims to identify, analyze, and manage risks, while WPI tailors a practical approach to each site. The ultimate goal of this combination is to protect the students, the advisors, the program and the institution.

Part of the process of working towards managing the risks the WPI risk management team saw the institution being exposed to was defining what “risk management,” meant to the University. The risk management team identified various exposures and measured them against WPI’s willingness and ability to withstand potential losses resulting from those exposures. The risk management team then determined how to implement policies and practices to best control these identified risks with appropriate procedures. These policies and procedures are reviewed each year. A crucial part of managing to control identified risks is the training that WPI provides students and faculty advisors. [5]

**Preparation and Resources**

### For Students

Each project, regardless of its area of focus, calls upon students to develop specific skills. As students work with broad problem statements and develop specific goals for their project, they are actively engaged in open-ended problem solving. Typically project topics are outside the scope of the students’ areas of study, and therefore the students must learn how to learn about new subjects. Teamwork skills are honed and practiced throughout the experience as students work together to produce a solution. The formal documentation and presentation skills required to successfully complete an academic project off-campus insure that students master how to communicate in a variety of mediums and for a variety of audiences.

In addition to the academic preparation that students participate in, they are also given orientation and preparation for the cultural, religious and ethnic differences they may encounter off-campus. This may include specific language training, depending on the site. Faculty members with expertise in the area provide a general history of the site where the students are going. Students are instructed as to proper dress, proper etiquette, and how to expect the host country nationals to treat them. This is all augmented with site specific handbooks developed by the IGSD that includes WPI policies and paperwork, health and safety information specific to the site, logistical information regarding where they will be living, and advice for dealing with transition issues.

### For Faculty Advisors

Each year, faculty members apply from across the campus to participate as residential project advisors at the various sites. Those chosen travel with the students and reside on site during the entire experience. Responsibilities of the advisors include not only the typical academic issues that arise, but also issues that take place due to living on site and off-campus. Because there are special issues that arise from being away from campus for all participants — students and faculty alike — training has been developed specifically for advisors at off-campus locations. A conscientious approach to risk management has necessitated preparing advisors for worst-case scenarios, while also providing the less experienced off-campus advisors with an opportunity to learn from their colleagues who have been away often. Areas of concern that are addressed during these training sessions include: sexual harassment, transportation, drugs and alcohol, recognizing and responding to students at risk, health and safety issues, housing concerns, students’ behavior, social and personal growth, and helping students get the most of the cultural experience. All of these areas are deemed to be out of the purview of regular project advising and therefore get special attention.

WPI has developed an operational handbook as a resource that is provided to all Resident Faculty Advisors who are on-site with the students. In addition to all of the information described above included in the students’ Handbook, the
faculty are provided with more information that they may need while in residence. Included is the Crisis Management Plan that contains a detailed description of what to do and who to contact in the event of an emergency. Emergencies that are anticipated include such events as natural disasters, crimes that may be committed against a student, crimes that may be committed by a student, a student’s disappearance, sexual harassment, and violations of the WPI’s Code of Conduct. Faculty advisors are provided with an extensive list of names and contact numbers for the WPI Crisis Management Team on campus.

STRUCTURE OF THE TRAINING

Collaboration

The comprehensive training described here has evolved over time. Until a few years ago, faculty advisors planning to travel off campus with students were convened annually for a lunch meeting. At this lunch meeting different issues were discussed in a somewhat haphazard way with people sharing war stories and anecdotes of past experiences. Clear guidelines and expectations were not provided to the departing faculty yet in the meantime the IGSD had developed such guidelines and expectations for the students. There was clearly a disconnect! Once that realization occurred, it was obvious that this needed to be remedied.

The first step in remedial action was to organize a full day retreat for training purposes. Next a group of experienced faculty and professional staff in the IGSD developed a list of the outcomes WPI wanted off-campus faculty advisors to take away with them at the end of a one-day training session. The three general areas that all outcomes fit into were academic, interpersonal and operational. Specific outcomes identified that did not fall within the academic realm included cross cultural issues, group dynamics, risk management, policies, time management, conflict management, self awareness of own cultural issues and a category defined as “whole student advising.” In reviewing this list it was apparent that we needed to engage others with expertise in these areas to help us develop training.

The director of counseling services, dean of student life, the university risk manager, the diversity officer, the director of academic resources - all experts in these areas - were invited to help develop the training needed to target the identified outcomes. By using actual cases based on relatively recent WPI experience the advisors preparing to embark on an off-campus experience were exposed to situations and the proper way to handle them. The cases were crafted to exemplify issues previously identified as being very important to a successful experience. The discussions were designed to engage all participants in small group work as they struggled with solutions. The panel of experts made up of WPI professionals who deal with these issues while students are on campus responded to each of the cases and the solutions proposed. In some cases it was the first time a faculty member was able to put a name with a face – they may have referred students to get counseling in their 20 year tenure at WPI, but they had never met the person providing that service! The design of that day’s training provided opportunities for collaboration and mentoring among all of the constituencies – two key activities identified early in the planning stages as critical to the success of the advisors once on site with students.

Evaluation

It was critically important to gather feedback from the participants of this first retreat to determine its worth. A very simple evaluation was distributed and collected at the end of the day. The following prompts constituted the formal evaluation form:

1. Please list three things that you found valuable at this retreat.
2. Please list anything that you found unimportant at this retreat.
3. Please identify anything that you, as a project advisor, may do differently as a result of having attended this retreat.
4. Please make suggestions for future retreats.

Evaluation results for the past three years that the training has been offered are summarized in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE I</th>
<th>EVALUATION RESULTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PN AN RR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participants</td>
<td>37 29 78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important</td>
<td>87 77 89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unimportant</td>
<td>87 5 6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PN = Potential # Responses  AN = Actual # Responses  RR = Response Rate

For each year the number of participants or trainees is indicated – for example, in Year 1, 37 faculty members were trained. The response rates on these evaluations were extremely high 78%, 75% and 80% respectively. The “actual number” refers to how many participants turned in a completed evaluation. – in Year 3, 20 of the 25 trainees chose to submit an evaluation. The “potential number” of positive responses and negative responses is provided (3 times the “actual number”). For example, in Year 2 there was potential for 63 “important” responses and 63 “unimportant” responses, however there were in actuality 55 “important” issues and only 3 “unimportant” issues identified by the respondents. The high number of positive responses (items listed as “important”) versus the low number of negative (items listed as “unimportant”) indicates that there is high value perceived by those participating in the training for each of the three years.

It was gratifying to see that the evaluations at the conclusion of the first retreat confirmed the success of the day. Responses to the prompt “list valuable things learned at the retreat” included:

- “learned about non-academic issues associated with project supervision”
Feedback from the first year evaluations also indicated strongly that advisors wanted still more information, training and resources on specific non-academic issues including alcohol and drug use, enforcement of policies, adjudication on site to name a few. With this information, planning for future retreats commenced.

An outside evaluation of our efforts occurred in 2003 when TIAA-CREF Hesburgh bestowed their Certificate of Excellence on WPI for equipping our faculty to handle unconventional roles beyond the classroom necessitated by the global program, making sure educators have the skills to help students succeed educationally as well as cope with safety, social, and behavioral issues.

Anticipating needs in faculty training development

Still committed to keeping the day collaborative and very participatory the training each year since is designed to address the following alphabetized list of non-academic issues:

- **Academic dishonesty** – Review of academic honesty policies and how they must apply off-campus as well.
- **Adjudication off-campus** – Review of the adjudication policy and process for advisors at off-campus locations.
- **Alcohol abuse** – Basic educational information and the importance of moderation and safety if and when students choose to drink.
- **Anger management** – Students may have a burst of anger, an acute period of anger… how to assist the student in managing anger and how to mend fences. Also, to determine if this a dangerous act, pattern of anger or alcohol/drug induced.
- **Attitude** – Students may manifest a sense of entitlement, and inability to be on a team, etc. How to manage this "attitude".
- **Confidentiality** – In compliance with the Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA) what information can advisors share with parents or other concerned parties regarding students?
- **Cultural adjustment** – Inability to adjust culturally can manifest itself in numerous ways: homesickness, inappropriate presentation of self, spending too much time on e-mail with people at home. Identifying strategies for helping participants adjust.
- **Depression** – Sadness versus clinical depression and potential suicide ideation: how to spot it, what to do.
- **Diversity** – Issues pertaining to students of color. This can involve group dynamics within teams, racism in the host country, or even homesickness compounded by the inability of the student to find food from their own culture.
- **Drug use** – Basic educational information on the topic and issues related to the Drug Free Schools and Campuses Act (DFSCA).
- **Dysfunctional teams** – How to aid a team that is unable to work together effectively toward a common goal.
- **Eating disorders** – Symptoms and issues that cause students to use food as an emotional control mechanism.
- **Gay/lesbian issues** - Issues that may arise include group dynamics within teams, tolerance of the host country, offering support around relationship issues, or a student coming out while off campus.
- **Gender discrimination** – How to deal with the issue when someone is treated differently due to his or her gender in a different culture where this may be tolerated.
- **Group dynamics issues** – How to deal with negative interactions between members of the group that prevent the group from performing at peak efficiency.
- **Health and safety** – Helping students understand how to stay healthy and safe while off-campus.
- **High-risk activities** – Includes known dangerous activities, and also includes “risky” behavior that puts any participant's health or safety in jeopardy.
- **Inappropriate relationships** – Relationships between team members, sexual relationships with liaison, professor, locals, team members etc.
- **Insurance issues** – Issues that include general liability, professional liability, personal property and WPI-owned property, rented/leased auto insurance, contractual requirements, and transfer of risk through certificates of insurance and indemnification language.
- **Judicial issues** – When should advisors be concerned with past behaviors of students reflected in judicial proceedings here on campus?
- **Low self esteem** – Shyness, inability to participate fully with others...how to help someone gain a sense of self.
- **Policy violation** – This applies to both advisors and students while off-campus.
- **Sexual assault** – How do you offer the victim support and resources; deal with the perpetrator (particularly if s/he is a teammate); work with other involved parties (roommates, parents, etc).
- **Sexual harassment** – Dealing with a hostile environment or quid pro quo situation, working within the justice process, offering support to the victim, dealing with the perpetrator (particularly if s/he is a fellow advisor), working with other involved parties (teammates, etc).
- **Time management** – How to make the best use of time to achieve a desired outcome - includes goal setting, prioritizing, and developing action plans.
- **Work habits** – Identifying routine methods of carrying out tasks.

It probably is impossible to deal with each of these issues separately in a one day retreat. However, by providing faculty advisors with a comprehensive list of these issues, paired with who on campus is the expert to consult with, a valuable
resource is being provided. The case studies chosen to be developed can include many of these topics in a single case, thereby giving people an opportunity to discuss any concerns.

By collaborating with the professionals already employed by the University, we developed a meaningful training program that empowered the faculty charged with leading student groups off-campus in pursuit of academic credit. These professionals, who include the Director of the Student Development Center, the Director of Diversity & Women’s Programs, the Associate Treasurer, the Director of Risk Management, the Dean of Student Life, the Director of Minority Affairs, the Director of Health Services, the Director of Healthy Alternatives, the Director, of the Academic Resources Center, and the Student Disabilities Coordinator, add areas of expertise that exceed that of the faculty. And by using case studies based in our own WPI experience we are able to engage the faculty in significant discussions of what can and does happen while off-campus. With serious consideration of things that have occurred in the recent history, while trying to anticipate other issues, we are able to equip the faculty leaders with strategies and resources for dealing with non-academic issues.

CONCLUSION

A successful study abroad experience is much more than just academic. Accompanying faculty advisors should be “trained” in the non-academic areas. And when done thoughtfully, the advisors gain confidence because they are empowered to handle nontraditional problems. When faced with situations like those described in the beginning of this document, the faculty will know when and where to turn for help.

There are also many resources available through professional associations concerned with education abroad. The largest association, NAFSA: Association of International Educators has many resources available through their website www.nafsa.org/secussa. There is a wealth of information available through a FIPSE funded program entitled “Safety Abroad First Educational Travel Information” (SAFETI) at http://www.lmu.edu/globaled/safeti/. And there is now a professional organization solely devoted to education abroad – The Forum on Education Abroad accessed at http://www.forumea.org/ that has promoted “standards of good practice” for the profession that address faculty qualifications, including appropriate levels of engagement with students inside and outside the classroom. [6]

From what has been learned in developing our own training we offer the following advice:

- Anyone looking to develop such training needs to collaborate with those on their own campus that have the professional expertise to guide the preparation of faculty.

- It is critical to involve faculty who have experience at off-campus locations. Identifying past incidences that they have encountered and using these incidences as case studies is a way to capture the attention of those preparing to go off-campus.

- Identify issues that have arisen in the past and look to trends on campus that may travel off campus with students.

- Gather feedback from your faculty advisors about what their needs are and what they found useful in a training session.

By collaborating with other professionals on and off your own campus, drawing on your own institutional experiences, being anticipatory in dealing with issues that can arise, and by evaluating the training being provided, great strides will be made in preparing your faculty to handle unconventional roles beyond the classroom.

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REFERENCES


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