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Creating a Study Abroad Community: Honors Senior Thesis Project

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Winter 2014

HNR 499

Advisor: Alissa Lane

Creating a Study Abroad Community: Honors Senior Thesis Project

For my senior project I helped the Padnos International Center host an event to bring together study abroad alumni, future study abroad students and international students. This paper is a personal reflection about the process of creating that event and my involvement with the PIC.

I studied abroad in Bilbao, Spain in winter of 2013, and I loved every minute of it. The staff at the Padnos International Center was extremely helpful; however where I got most of my valuable information about the program was one of my friends who attended the program the year before. Even knowing the answers to simple questions like “Is the metro easy to navigate? Do the dorms provide hangers? What should I pack?” gave so much peace of mind, and made the time before leaving for Spain a bit less stressful. I was very lucky to have a friend who was alum of the same program as me, however many other students don’t have that opportunity; therefore my goal was to find a way to fix this problem.

I talked to the staff of the PIC and they stated they were noticing the same issues as well. During the fall semester, we discussed ideas of how to fix this, with my initial idea being a one on one mentorship program between future study abroad students and study abroad alumni. At the time, this seemed like a great idea to me; however there were many difficulties that I will note later. That semester, another study abroad intern set up an event where study abroad alumni, future study abroad students, and international students could meet and talk. For being the first time this event was put on, it went pretty well, however, there was not the level of organization there needed to be, and almost too many students were invited causing some students not to have another student to talk to from their study abroad university, or having a ratio of 6 alum to only one future student. I noted all these issues that could be fixed, but at that point my main focus was getting the mentorship program off the ground.

After this event I passed around applications (which are attached at the end of this paper), but the overall response was underwhelming. Most students didn’t fill out an application, and the ones that did had already exchanged contact info, making the program a bit irrelevant. The original goal of the program was to have the mentorship involve scheduled times of meeting, and have a structured set up. This turned out to be more complicated than expected, as I was not able to have the emails of students due to privacy issues. Therefore, my idea of myself setting up partners was not able to happen, and I also had to think about how this program would require a lot of work from the PIC in the future, which wasn’t ideal. Also, another worry was about the

relationship between the mentor and mentees, what if they did not get along? What if the alum hated their experience and said bad things? It became a question of how the office could control situations like this.

The more I thought about the more I realized that a mentorship program might not be the best way to go. At the mentioned event, I was able to meet a student who was about to study abroad at the program I attended, so I was able to see what it would be like to be a “mentor.” It was with this experience that I realized that putting a set schedule in place to meet would make our lives too complicated, which was not the goal of the program. The goal was to bring alumni and future students together, and this event alone will do that. That student and I got along very well, and he asked me any questions he had and we still touch base every once in a while, while he is currently abroad. This is all done without having a schedule or requirements, and I think many students will do the same as alumni love talking about their experiences and future students have plenty of questions. The conversation and friendship will develop without a plan in place, the step the PIC needs to do is start this conversation by bringing the students together.

As mentioned before, international students were also invited to the event, as Grand Valley has partnerships with schools around the world in which their students come to GV and our students go there. Before this project I knew there were international students at GV, I just had never met any of them. At the time of this project, another part of PIC was also reinventing itself, as the previous Study Abroad Alumni Association and International Student Groups were about to combine and create the new student organization, called Glo, the Global Leadership Organization. I attended these meeting since I was to be seeing these students at my event, so that was a fun bonus that I was able to be part of a new organization at my last semester on campus.

This semester, I, along with the PIC staff, realized the best way to continue my main goal would be to host another event like in the previous semester, we just needed to organize it better. Therefore, we decided to contact only the students that were a part of partnership programs, which allowed us to stay much more organized and to be able to keep track of the RSVP's and who was coming from what program. This also allowed us to invite international students that were from these schools. This plan worked great because we were able to see the ratio of future study abroad students to past participants and international students even before the event happened, so we were able to specifically reach out to certain people for example, if we needed more past participants if a large group of future students were coming. This also allowed us to cancel certain groups coming, if for some reason no one from that group could attend the meeting.

By staying organized beforehand, the day of the event we were able to print out table markers for each program so we were able to get the room organized very quickly. At the event in the previous semester, it took time to figure out who was there from what program and to organize the room, so this functioned much better and caused a lot less confusion. We were also

able to book a room that was better suited for this event that was split into round tables, rather than a classroom so we were able to place a list of possible discussion topics on each table along with the program name. It was also nice for everyone there to have someone from their program to talk to, rather than some students showing up and realizing no one else was there.

The event was on Friday, April 4th from 12 to 2pm, and we had a turnout of about 45 students. The students all connected really well, and the event had great feedback. I personally met with students heading to the program I attended, and they all said this event was extremely helpful and they were really happy the PIC put the event on. At the event I saw so many emails and telephone numbers being exchanged, proving what I thought about the students having the motivation to stay in contact with each other without a mentorship program in place. It was also nice that PIC staff was also able to attend to answer questions that students might think of in the moment, and to also monitor the conversations if necessary, which is something that could not be done in a mentorship setting. The only downside of this event was that students who couldn't attend due to work or class were not able to meet other students, however, if they emailed us saying that they were unable to come but wanted contact info of another student from their program, we provided that information, so that took care of that issue as best we could.

In the end, I am very happy with how this semester went and how the event turned out, and I know this is something that the PIC can put on in the semesters to come, whereas a mentorship program would have just been too complicated. I would love for this program to almost become a staple in the process students go through as they prepare to go abroad. I think in a semester or two when the event becomes organized near perfectly, it could be open to almost all programs that GV offers for study abroad rather than solely partnership programs.

I really enjoyed my experience of being able to work with the PIC, and I am very excited I was able to fix an issue I noticed occurring when I went abroad. It's nice to know that I was able to make a difference in all of these students' study abroad preparation experience. I think it was a good experience for me to also realize how it's easier to start simpler on an idea, rather than try a complicated plan, and start by fixing the need that way. It was a great experience doing this for my senior thesis project, I got to meet new people and fix a problem I knew would benefit other students, and I am very happy I had this opportunity.

Attached is the previously mentioned mentorship applications, although the mentorship program did not turn out, these applications could be used if a mentorship ever did happen, or just for a guideline of topics students could discuss at the event. There is also a discussion topic list we placed at each of the tables to help students with ideas of what to discuss, as well as a mock up flyer for that the PIC could use for next semester's event, as this year we only send out emails, and a flyer would make it more exciting to students and garner more attention.

Why should I be a study abroad mentor?

You've been on study abroad, you know all about the amazing adventures you had and the memories that will last a lifetime. You also know about the struggles that come with adjusting to a new culture and leaving the US for a long period of time. Yet you know every second was worth it and you wouldn't change your time abroad for the world, so why not share your experiences with another student?? When you become a mentor you will meet with another student going to your same program and you can share all the stories you have and help them prepare for the adventure of a lifetime! Think about when you were about to go abroad, wouldn't you have loved to have someone to talk to who was in your shoes?? Now you can be that person for someone else! This program isn't a strict set up that will take tons of your time, all we want you to do is meet with a student who is about to go abroad a few times (and hopefully even more!) and discuss some topics that we think will be beneficial to the student. This leadership experience will look great on a resume and talking to another person about your experience will help you be able to evaluate your time abroad and be able explain it even better when you are asked in an interview, plus who doesn't want the chance to tell their stories from abroad one more time?? Sign up today!!

Study Abroad Mentorship Application-Alumni

Name:_____

Email address:_____

Expected Graduation Date:_____

Where did you study abroad/what program/what term:

Why would you recommend your study abroad program?:

Did you travel to other places while abroad?:

Why do you want to be a study abroad mentor?:

Do you wish this program would have been around when you were about to go abroad?

Are you a part of the Study Abroad Alumni Association?: Yes/No

Thanks for your application!!

Why should you want a study abroad mentor?

Studying abroad will be one of the most exciting times of your life, but may will also be the most challenging. If you sign up to have a mentor you will be able to talk to a study abroad alum who has been in your shoes, and has advice specific to your program; from what classes to take to what types of clothing to bring. You will be able to have someone to talk to about your worries, and also someone to support you and confirm what an amazing adventure you are about to have. Having a mentor will allow you to have a friend as you go through the entire preparation process, and get you ready for the adventure of a lifetime! Sign up today!!

Study Abroad Mentorship Application-Going Abroad

Name: _____

Email address: _____

Expected Graduation Date: _____

Where are you studying abroad/what program/what term:

Why did you decide to study abroad?

What are your worries about studying abroad?:

What are you most excited for about studying abroad?:

Do you think this program will be beneficial to you as you prepare to go abroad?

Thanks for your application!!

DISCUSSION TOPICS!

- **Introduce yourself!**
- **Travel**
 - How to get to and from airport?
 - Best way to get around the city?
- **What to pack/bring?**
 - Best form of payment (credit card, cash etc)
 - Weather
 - Attire for classes, going out etc.
 - Electrical adapters?
- **Classes**
 - Any recommendations for what classes to take?
 - Where do you get books?
- **Entertainment**
 - Fun places to go in the city?
 - Other cities or countries to travel to?
- **Exchange contact info!**



Creating a Study Abroad Community

Friday, April 8th

12-2pm KC 2266

Are you a study abroad alum or an international student? Then you need to come to this event, as there are future study abroad students who have questions you can answer!

Are you a future study abroad student? Then you need to come to this event so you can get your questions about your program answered, by students that were in your shoes and have attended the university you are about to go to!

This is an informal event meant to give you the opportunity to meet and talk with other students who have or will be attending the program you did, with the hope of creating friendships and creating a study abroad community!

There will be free food!

A LAKER NEVER STOPS EXPLORING