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Experiential Education: Considerations for Third-Party Provider Relationships

NAFSA 2009 Panel Session
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Panel Objective

The session will allow education abroad advisors to explore how third party providers work with institutions to offer Work, Internship and Volunteer Abroad (WIVA) programs in the most effective, efficient and affordable manner and how they can be beneficial to all parties (students, parents, universities). The session should better prepare the audience to evaluate and collaborate with third party providers in delivering successful experiential education programs abroad.

The panel offers three unique perspectives on Experiential Education: a third-party internship provider, a third-party volunteer service provider, and a university advisor with experience working with third-parties.

Commitment to Experiential Education

The trends of globalization, increased specialization in the workplace, the ease of information flow across borders and the need to differentiate oneself in an increasingly competitive global employment marketplace has led to an increase in demand for experiential education opportunities. As universities are attempting to keep up with the changing nature of a globalized economy and afford their students more opportunity beyond the classroom, third party relationships can provide a unique, cost-effective means of expanding unique program offerings while further internationalizing an institution's campus.

There is little debate about the value of experiential education but there are many questions when considering what programs are best for your students, and how to establish and maintain them, including:

1. What experiential education programs does my institution currently

offer?

2. What constitutes a 'good' program and why?
3. What options are available for establishing and maintaining experiential education programs?
4. What common standards or effective practices exist for the delivery of experiential education programs?
5. How do I assess credentials for a third party provider and what resources are available to find them?

Benefits to Working with Third Party Providers

Working with third party providers for experiential education programs abroad offers many benefits, including but not limited to:

- Enhance institutional internationalization and complement existing programs
- Access unique program options not currently provided by your institution
- Single partner to provide access and management of multiple programs/locations
- Uniquely focused experience and expertise of third party provider
- Lower cost to institution compared to managing programs internally
- Access to non-traditional programs and locations
- Local presence in foreign locations to facilitate programs, and provide safety and accountability
- Assured culturally sensitive assistance to local community and/or enhanced coordination with local directors and community leaders. (Note: we, of course, would put this one at the top of our list.)

Standards & Effective Practices for Third Party Provider Programs

With the growth of WIVA programs, demand for programs from students, and the number of third party provider organizations, certifying third party providers and the value of their programs is becoming more challenging for institutions. Given most programs are provided outside the oversight of university advisors, transparency and clear communication between provider, student, parent, and institution is critical.

The introduction of a common set of effective practices and standards for experiential education programs would aim to consider the following components:

- Clear definition of what constitutes a WIVA program
- Preparation and planning
- Pre-departure orientation & documentation
- Monitoring and assessment procedures
- Documentation of experience and evaluation

Professional Associations Discussing Standards for WIVA

The growth of experiential education programs has caught the attention of many professional associations within the past few years. In addition to NAFSA's WIVA subcommittee, many of the following organizations offer information regarding effective practices for experiential education programs:

- WIVA (NAFSA Subcommittee for Work, Internships, Volunteer Abroad) (<http://www.nafsa.org/wiva>)
- NAFSA—Good Practices for Health & Safety in Education Abroad (www.nafsa.org, search using “safety”)
- European Association for International Education (EAIE) (www.eaie.org)
- Forum on Education Abroad—Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad (www.forumea.org)
- International Volunteer Programs Association (IVPA)—Principles & Practices (<http://www.volunteerinternational.org/principles.html>)
- National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE)—Standards of Practice: Eight Principles (www.nsee.org)
- The Brookings Institute's Initiative on International Volunteering and Service, (<http://www.brookings.edu/projects/volunteering.aspx>)

Experiential Education through Internships

Internships provide students a unique opportunity to gain practical, hands on work experience in their chosen academic and/or career field. This experience not only helps bridge the gap between the classroom and the professional world but it also allows young people an opportunity to learn first hand what a given career field may be like in a 'real world' environment.

An international internship is like a fingerprint as no two experiences are the same.

The creation and management of internship programs abroad, particularly in non-native language destinations, pose some of the biggest challenges for institutions hoping to offer such opportunities to their students. International education programs are difficult to manage with a limited number of considerations (core program element, curriculum, management, accommodations, etc), while internships also must take into consideration:

- Sourcing and maintaining direct relationships with businesses abroad
- Assessing the credibility, accountability, safety, etc of each host business
- Define internship responsibilities and ensure match between intern and employer
- Provide guarantee of placements and alternatives should a match not succeed
- Regular correspondence with host company supervisor and intern assessment

- Address number of hours necessary for earning credit and what credit options are available

Questions to consider for international internship programs

1. What goes into an international internship and how is it delivered?
2. What are effective practices for administration of internships abroad?
3. What common standards could be adopted to most effectively and efficiently maintain international internships?
4. What assessment procedures and evaluation protocol governs an internship abroad?
5. What constitutes a successful internship and how is success measured?
6. What are the benefits of working with third party providers in the delivery of internship programs?
7. Where do I find information about third party providers and the programs they offer?

Experiential Education through Volunteering

At the foundation of volunteer abroad programs is the intent to both provide a needed service to local people, and satisfy the volunteer's desire to learn about the "host" community's culture through "hands on" work. The volunteer work project provides the vehicle for cross-cultural exchange of energies, ideas, understanding, and ultimately, friendships. While this concept has caught hold with mainstream America only within the last two decades, its roots run deep. International service by "civilians" was launched shortly after WWI by French pacifist Pierre Ceresole to engage French and German youth to rebuild towns destroyed by the war. Various faith-based and non-profit efforts emerged in succeeding years to respond to growing humanitarian needs worldwide.

A successful volunteer program can be the most catalytic and delineative experience in a student's academic career, and is further enhanced if offered as part of a directed curriculum. As such, the host community and culture become the real-life service-learning extension for courses such as:

- field experience in foreign aid and micro-business
- community human and economic development
- direct assistance in public health and health care
- "real-world" use of foreign languages
- international communication and foreign relations

Additionally, service programs offer the student opportunities to enhance interpersonal skills, problem-solve professional situations in an intercultural context, and enhance critical thinking skills.

Key in this equation is the sending organization's relationship with the local sponsoring organization or institution so as to ensure the appropriateness of the work projects and the proper integration of the volunteer in the local program.

Ethical organizations:

- Protect the host community's independence and encourage self-reliance
- Never impose outside agendas and honor local people's vision
- Guard against exploitation of local people for the volunteer's gain
- Vigilantly monitor the program's cultural impact and make corrections as needed
- Provide appropriate financial and human resource support
- Employ experts in development and volunteer management
- Invest in local hosts and projects carefully

Today, both non-profit and for-profit organizations offer volunteer service programs abroad and provide a vast array of agendas and program concentrations. Questions to ask when choosing an appropriate volunteer program are:

1. How long have you been operating service programs?
2. How do you engage the volunteer on-site and evaluate their productivity?
3. How many hours per day do you engage the volunteers in the work project?
4. How do you ensure the long-term value of the volunteer program for the host community?
5. What is your volunteer repeat rate?
6. What are the core values of your organizational efforts abroad?
7. What endorsements have you acquired from your sponsors and/or partners?
8. How do you select your local partners?
9. Do you sustain your local volunteer work partners over time?
10. Do you employ local people as your team leaders and consultants?

Experiential Education: The Institutional Perspective

1. What is the nature of your education-abroad office mandate, i.e. curricular and/or co-curricular?
2. How does your University address these issues, especially with respect to co-curricular education abroad?

- Concerns for health & safety of students going abroad
 - Eligibility for University services such as Travel Abroad Health Insurance
 - Tracking of participants (Open Doors only tracks study abroad for-credit)
 - Funding for international educational experiences
3. Where else should students turn for expert advice about education-abroad experiences?
 4. What does research show about educational value in international internships/service-learning?
 5. What structural frameworks exist for experiential education-abroad opportunities? (“Experiential” defined here as out-of-classroom experiences such as research, internships, volunteer service, work abroad, etc.)
 - Campus office dedicated to developing international internships
 - Campus funding sources specifically designated to co-curricular education abroad
 - Employers, e.g. US State Department
 - Special education-abroad program organizations (essentially a specialized subset of programs sharing many features in common with “study abroad”)
 - Student organizations
 - Individually-found internships, research, etc.
 6. Possible levels of affiliation with third-party providers
 - University-sponsored curricular program
 - University-sponsored co-curricular program
 - Advising and referrals to external, unaffiliated programs
 - On-campus programming such as panel discussions and international opportunities fairs
 - Provision of information
 7. Due diligence in selecting external organizations—how to assess?
 8. Reputation—Affiliations with universities, etc.
 9. Guinea pig method—Direct feedback from students
 10. Direct questioning of provider