

The International Experience: Developing Study Abroad and Work Experience Opportunities for Students

*“What nations don’t know can hurt them. The stakes involved in study abroad are that simple, that straightforward, and that important. For their own future and that of the nation, college graduates today must be internationally competent”.*¹

The above quote sends a very important message to all of us involved in education. The Lincoln Commission has a bold vision for the United States. The vision contemplates sending one million students to study abroad annually by 2016-17.

In the United States, according to the Institute of International Education’s 2003-2004 analysis, just 108 institutions of higher education account for 50 percent of all students abroad.² This tells us that there is plenty of room to develop international opportunities at our colleges and universities.

Providing students that are enrolled in a two-year diploma program is challenging due to time constraints and the competency based curriculum. A study abroad term may not be realistic or desirable, but an international learning experience is still possible.

At the MacEwan School of Business we have a program that integrates an international practicum as a required component of the program of study. Students immerse themselves in the languages, culture, history and the business practices of Asia. Through their classroom experiences, and their work experience in Asia, they develop an understanding of how business is able to link cultures and open doors to new experiences and ideas. The opportunities provided for the students, however, go far beyond the classroom and often result in life-changing experiences.

Graduates of the diploma program now work in many parts of both Asia and Canada, in workplaces as varied as manufacturing, importing and exporting, marketing, consulting, education and research, and government services.

The Asia Pacific coordinator organizes the two to four month internships. He travels to Asia twice a year and meets with our education partners. Many of these internships would not be possible without the support of the Alberta Japan Office in Tokyo, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the Alberta Hong Kong office, and the Alberta Taiwan office. The links with business and government partners is crucial. The next link will be developing partnerships with educational institutions in Asia.

¹ www.lincolncommission.org Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, Global Competence & National Needs, p.3 (November 2005)

² *ibid.* p. 22

The international internship focuses on the cultural experience of living and working in Asia. It does not include course work completion at another higher education institution, which is a common study abroad activity. There are examples at MacEwan where study abroad is a component of a MacEwan course or a partnership with another educational institution. An example of an educational partnership is the Acupuncture program at MacEwan where final year acupuncture students go to Heze Medical College in Shandong Province, China and practice Traditional Chinese Medicine in hospitals in the country where acupuncture originated. Another example is a MacEwan course “Tropical Rainforest Ecology” which is an advanced biology course offered during the Spring Session. The course itself spans the month of May and the students spend two and a half weeks in Ecuador, with field trips to the Tiputini Biodiversity Field Station in a region of pristine Amazonian rainforest and a week in the Galapagos Islands.

How did these opportunities arise? Simply, the answer is in the work done by faculty champions to establish relationships with international partners. The Acupuncture program’s opportunity came when a group of faculty from Heze College arrived at MacEwan and were given a tour of the health and community studies facilities. They became quite excited when they discovered the Acupuncture Program. This opportunity was followed up with the dean and chair of the MacEwan program visiting Heze College and negotiating an agreement to make the study abroad opportunity a reality. In the case of the Asia Pacific program, the concept of the program and the establishment of the first international internships were the result of the passion and vision of one faculty member.

How do you cultivate faculty champions? You can start with the creation of an environment that raises awareness of global issues. This will require support of the college administration, but it is the grass roots approach that will really drive it.

Raising awareness of global issues and the internationalization of the curriculum can be good starting points for colleges wanting to increase international education opportunities for their faculty and staff. Each year at MacEwan we enjoy “Global College Week”. Hundreds of staff, faculty, students and participants from all areas of the college host events, create displays, incorporate learning activities into their classes, and attend guest lectures and workshops. Global College Week is an initiative that grew from the Canadian International Development Agency’s (CIDA) International Development Week. Many institutions from across Canada plan events to coincide with IDW, but MacEwan is one of just a few colleges that run events that span an entire week in a multi-campus environment. This year Craig Kielburger³ delivered the keynote address: “Me to We: How College & University Students Can Create Positive Social Change”.

³ Craig Kielburger, 24, is an accomplished child rights activist, an award-winning author and a popular speaker. He is the founder of the Free The Children, the world’s largest network of children helping children through education, which has been nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize and has established partnerships with the United Nations and Oprah’s Angel Network.

At MacEwan, we are on the cusp of the next stage of the development of our international education mandate. The introduction of four- year baccalaureate degrees is adding to the energy and new curriculum development. In the School of Business we are developing an International Business major, with initial focus on the Asia Pacific region. The college has recruited and hired a Director, International Education to help build and maintain new educational partnerships so that our students have more opportunities for study abroad and student exchanges. We are recruiting internationally for faculty that will bring a diverse and rich background of experience to our classrooms. These new faculty members will help us to forge new partnerships with international businesses and post secondary institutions.

The models for international education are only limited by one's imagination. Take for example the newly launched "Scholar Ship"⁴ which is a semester-long academic program aboard a globe traveling passenger ship, where students and faculty from all corners of the world come together to develop their intercultural competencies and leadership skills. This is a collaboration and partnership among four universities, and it brings home the point that we can do much more by collaborating with other post secondary institutions on international opportunities for students and faculty.

There is no doubt that the global world is at our doorstep and that there are many ways to provide international experiences for our students, whether on campus with activities such as Global College Week, or in other countries in partnership with business or another higher education institution. There is recognition at the national level by the United States government of the benefits to students for study abroad and the Lincoln Commission's vision to send one million students abroad annually will be helped through the establishment of scholarships. However, the work of preparing our students for successful international experiences will be done by our champions teaching and supporting students in our colleges and universities.

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⁴www.thescholarship.com

