

By Glenn Cook

Structuring a Financially Sustainable Education Abroad Office

As student participation and programs evolve, education abroad offices should consider if their current structure meets students' needs and keeps the office financially viable.

MARGARET WIEDENHOEFT IS IN AN ENVIABLE POSITION. As executive director of the Center for International Programs at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, she oversees a self-sustaining study abroad program with participation from 70 percent of the school's undergraduates.

"It's really easy to rest on your laurels when you have a 70 percent participation rate and say, 'That's not too bad,' but we know that students are changing and their goals are changing," Wiedenhoef says. "The way they want things structured has changed, too."

These changes, combined with increased budgetary pressures for both self-sustaining and university-funded programs, are forcing a slow but steady evolution in study abroad programs. Now, in almost every college and university in the United States, the size and



Brandon Koch is one of 1,700 students from Elon University who participate in an education abroad program each year.

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Students studying abroad from Elon University spell out their school's name.

structure of these programs vary depending on student demand, faculty support, and the individual institution's long-term goals.

"There is no single thing, or even single group of things, that are going to sustain and grow programs and a study abroad office—and each office's constraints and opportunities are as unique as the institution in which they are embedded," says Brook Blahnik, associate director of Learning Abroad Programs at the University of Minnesota, which serves 5,000 students each year.

'Help Them Find a Way'

Study abroad officials at both public and private universities say building up existing programs requires a mix of flexibility and commitment. Making programs financially accessible to all students—not just those who can afford the out of pocket cost—is a particular challenge.

"There's more consciousness around that," says Karen McBride, who runs the University of Dayton's study abroad office. "I don't think I've ever met a student who says they don't want to go abroad. Either they will do it, or they want to do it and can't afford it, and it's our job to help them find a way to do so."

Like the University of Minnesota, Arizona State University (ASU) has a large study abroad office, serving more than 3,000 students a year and growing. Interest in ASU's programs—more than 250 in 65 countries across

all seven continents—has spiked by 40 percent over the past four years, director Adam Henry says.

A significant part of that increase is due to the Global Intensive Experience (GIE) that ASU established in 2015. GIE programs are embedded into regular semester courses and run by university faculty during academic breaks that range from 7 to 12 days.

"Because of their relatively low cost and short duration, the model is serving a more diverse population," Henry says, noting that enrollment among first-generation, male, nontraditional, Hispanic, and African American students is far greater for GIE programs than for the traditional summer study abroad programs.

Perfecting the 'Balancing Act'

ASU's Study Abroad Office is approximately 80 percent self-funded, and Henry says his office is "staffed for capacity building." Since the GIE model launched, the overall program has added 450 students, and he now supervises a total of 11 study abroad advisers.

A similar model is offered at North Carolina's Elon University, which has 94 semester-long programs in 50 locations, as well as short-term programs during Thanksgiving and spring breaks. With a staff of six, the challenge is finding ways to serve the 1,700 students who either go abroad or complete domestic programs each year, says Amanda Zamzes, business and data manager in Elon's Global Education Center.

One challenge that the University of Minnesota's Learning Abroad Center faces with short-term programs, Blahnik says, is that most are "new each year and often run only once." That puts a burden on his self-funded office, which is spending as much staff time on a three-credit program as it does on programs that can result in students receiving up to 16 credits.

"The overhead and administration associated with building the itinerary and curriculum can only be spread across one, often smallish group of students," says Blahnik, whose 40 staff members work with about 5,000 students annually on more than 300 programs. "We work with the colleges and do our best to equitably split the workload so all parties can create high-quality, safe learning experiences that don't break the bank, but it is certainly a balancing act."

Anticipating Shifting Priorities

For smaller institutions with a long history of study abroad programs, such as Kalamazoo and the University of Dayton, the biggest hurdle is not getting too comfortable.

"We have to be mindful and innovative," Wiedenhoeft says. "We have a legacy system that is really a traditional model of study abroad—held during the junior year, with students being gone for two-thirds of the academic year. That is not the way it works for most students now. Most have time pressure, money pressure, and a real sense of 'FOMO' (fear of missing out)."

McBride, whose office also is self-funded and gives a portion of any profits to the university's general fund, has been working on a five-year strategic plan. The focus, she says, will be on increasing diversity and student access while maintaining the office's independence.

"It's a juggle sometimes in terms of priorities," she says. "We have to look for ways to make programs more affordable while maintaining quality. Offices like ours feel pressure during the budget process because people get used to you bringing money into the university—but at the same time, you want to make sure your program is accessible to everyone. We're putting together models now and will see how it goes."



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Elon student Jazmine Langley participated in one of the school's 94 programs in 50 locations across the globe.



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Working at a private college, Wiedenhoeft says her self-funded office is spending more and more time helping students access financial aid to cover the costs of studying abroad. The university is also looking at a two-week, first-year study abroad seminar for students after they finish a quarter of classes.

"What would it mean if we could say to students: 'Here's \$5,000. Find something that you can do and be part of something if you can't make the full semester study abroad work or if it's not something you're interested in,'" she says. "That's what we're looking at now: What can we do that is not 'instead of,' but 'both/and.'" ■

GLENN COOK is a freelance writer and photographer based in Virginia.

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